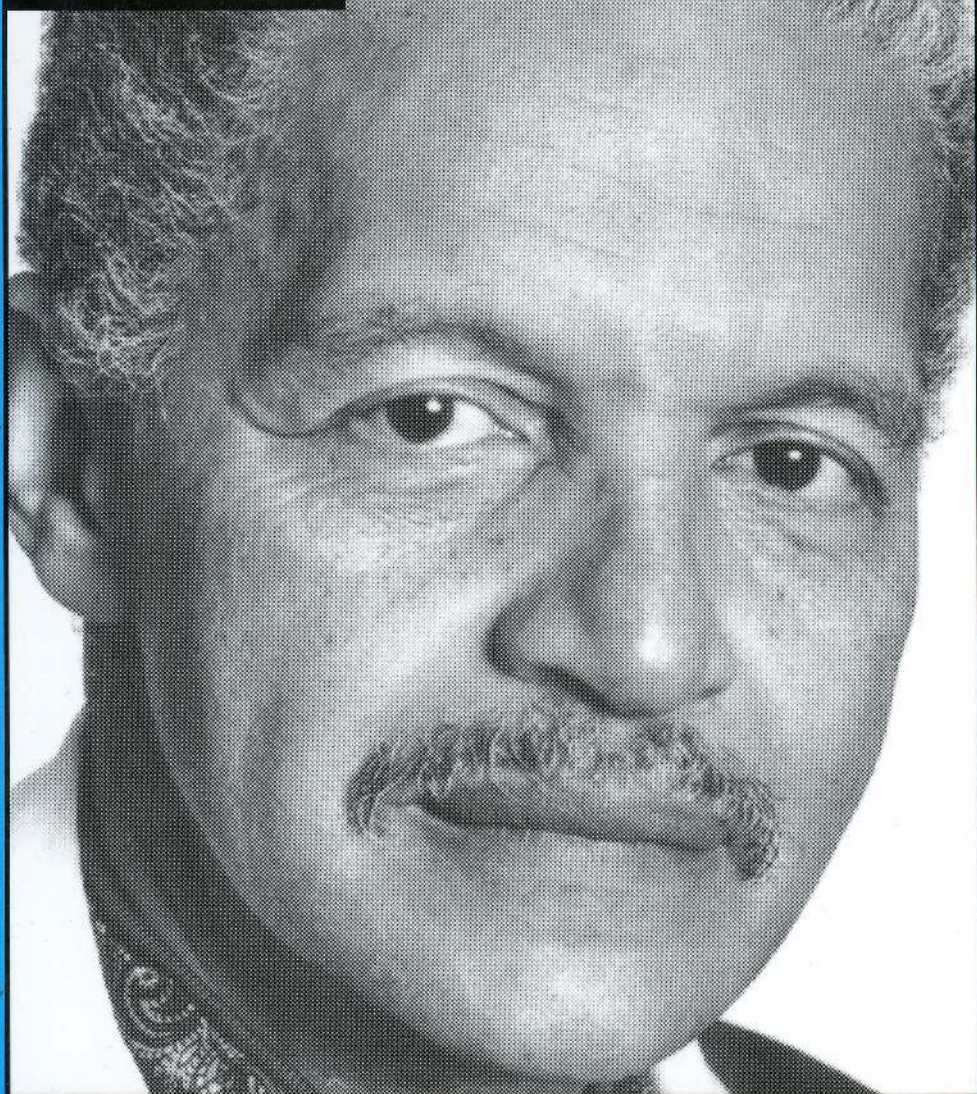


**RACE &  
CLASS**



**THE  
GENTLE REVOLUTIONARY**  
**ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF JAN CAREW**

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# **THE GENTLE REVOLUTIONARY**

**ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF  
JAN CAREW**

**EDITED BY JOY GLEASON CAREW  
AND HAZEL WATERS**



## Preface

On 24 September 2000, Jan Carew celebrated his eightieth year of life. For the next four months, friends and admirers used the occasion to come together and, in recognising Jan, endeavoured to provide perspectives on his contributions as an artist, a writer, historian, political activist and educator. The editors of *Race & Class*, for which he has written and on whose editorial board he serves, wanted to use this occasion to publish a special issue which would offer a selection of thought-provoking analyses of themes so important to Jan.

This issue, introduced by A. Sivanandan, falls into four sections: Essays, Reflections, Tributes and Biographical Odyssey with Bibliography. The Essays section offers pieces by Cecil Foster, Frank Birbalsingh, Joy Gleason Carew and Clinton Cox. The Reflections section, with pieces by Roy Heath, Nancy Singham, Ken Ramchand, Richard Sobel and Dennis Brutus, explores intersections between Jan Carew and these persons at various points in his life, stretching from his early years in Guyana, his years as one who gave voice to a self-liberating, post-war Caribbean, his activism in Chicago in the 1980s and his impact on students as a university professor. The Tributes section includes a selection of the messages sent and given at the four international gatherings held in his honour in the United States (Atlanta and Philadelphia), England (London) and Canada (Toronto). The final section, the Biographical Odyssey and Bibliography, serves as an overview of Jan Carew's life and contributions.

*Joy Gleason Carew*



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## The Gentle Revolutionary: essays in honour of Jan Carew

*Editors Joy Gleason Carew and Hazel Waters*

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# Jan Carew, renaissance man

By A. Sivanandan

Once in a while, a man or a woman comes along who epitomises the best of the worst of times – and shines out like a beacon to signal us to the further shores of hope. Jan Carew is one of them. Born at a time when empire was at its height and growing up when the pus of racism was seeping out from the sores of capital, Jan heralded and helped to shape the cultural revolution against colonialism and racism in poetry, painting, polemic and play. A wandering minstrel uprooted and cast abroad by the imperial imperative, he rooted himself wherever he was in the struggles of the people around him. And he was in many places, wearing many faces, but always in the same cause: freedom for the oppressed and downtrodden – teaching, writing, broadcasting, engaging with mighty men and women such as Malcolm X and Claudia Jones, Cheddi Jagan and Kwame Nkrumah, Paul Robeson and Langston Hughes.

In 1943, he is a customs officer in Georgetown, writing for the *Christmas Annual*, and devoting his leisure time to drawing and painting. Five years later, his paintings are being exhibited at the Cleveland Public Library. One year on, he is back home in Guyana, publishing *Streets of Eternity*, his first collection of poetry. In the same year, on his way to Prague to take up a scholarship at Charles University, he dallies in Paris and meets up with Picasso and Gide and Richard Wright. In 1950, he writes his first novel, *Rivers of his Night* (as yet unpublished). In 1951, he is in Amsterdam, guest-editing a multilingual literary journal, *de Kim*. In 1952, he returns to England to serve as a columnist on the *Kensington Post* and, between 1953 and 1959, as a member of the Lawrence Olivier company, appears in plays in London, Liverpool and New York, does regular broadcasts on the BBC on art, literature and current affairs and lectures in race relations at London University's Extra-Mural Department. In the meantime, he writes his first published novels, *Black Midas* and *The Wild Coast*, followed by *The Last Barbarian*.

In 1962, Jan returns to Guyana to serve as Director of Culture in Cheddi Jagan's government and, as Latin American correspondent

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A. Sivanandan is a political activist and writer and founding editor of *Race & Class*. His recent publications include a novel, *When Memory Dies* (Arcadia, 1997) and a collection of short stories, *Where the Dance Is* (Arcadia, 2000).

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for the London *Observer*, reports from Cuba on the missile crisis. In 1963, he is back in England acting as art critic for the *Art News and Review* and broadcasting on the BBC's Caribbean Voices, Home Service and Third Programme. In 1964, he travels to the USSR as guest of the Writers' Union and, on his return, publishes *Moscow is not my Mecca*. Soon afterwards he is editing the radical black fortnightly, *Magnet*, in London – and talking long into the night with Malcolm X. The following year, he is in Ghana, as adviser to the Publicity Secretariat in the Nkrumah government and editing the *Africa Review*. Two years later, he moves to Toronto, working for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and producing plays for television.

At last, in 1969, he comes to rest (sort of) in the United States – teaching at various universities, but not necessarily in any one campus or at any one time – and not just teaching alone, but writing (children's books, too, this time), exhorting, activating – serving, serving all the time as a soldier in the people's army. Which of course takes him to Grenada in 1982. And, when the revolution fails and the Third World laments, he lifts up our spirits with *Grenada: the hour will strike again*.

A renaissance man in the most deathly of times. A black renaissance man in the whitest of times. A *griot* tracing us back to the ghosts in our blood. And a presence, a persona – tall, elegant, majestic – to go with it all.

In the course of one revolving moon  
He was soldier, savant, statesman  
And Maroon. (*Pace Dryden*)

CECIL FOSTER

## Jan Carew and the reconstruction of the Canadian mosaic

In 1994, Jan Carew reached back to assert a citizenship that, like the country from which he claimed it, is seldom associated internationally with him or people like him. A Canadian publisher – unwittingly following in Carew’s footsteps of almost three decades earlier – was producing a volume of short stories and poems that would, essentially, recognise what for so long had been officially denied: Blackness in Canada.<sup>1</sup> These publications were intended to celebrate the Canadian reality, one that for three decades had positioned the country as the first officially multicultural country in the world, a sentiment that Jan Carew has always insisted was not entirely genuine. According to the official narrative, in Canada all ethnic groups are equal and have equality of opportunity.<sup>2</sup> Such a sentiment, Canadian officials boast, is captured in the almost annual declaration by the United Nations that Canada is the best country in which to live.<sup>3</sup> The publication of writings by leading Canadian Black voices was to be a celebration of this vibrant social mosaic of equal ethnicities.

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*Cecil Foster* is a Barbadian-born writer who lives in Toronto. His work, both fictional and non-fictional, explores the black experience in Canada as part of the black diaspora. His most recent work is *Dry Bone Memories* (Key Porter Books, 2000).

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Carew joined in this celebration of Blackness in Canada. But, typically, he did more: he placed the focus not only on ethnicity and writing but also on race and the writer. Carew attempted to return the discussions of who is Canadian and what is Canada to their primordial roots. He reminded Canadians of all colours and ethnicities of a tradition that was racist, and is still the operative ethos of 'Canadianness'. This is a tradition captured in the official mythology that suggests that the Canadian state has only two founding peoples; a tradition that leaves unstated that these peoples are white, that Canada was founded as a white homeland and on the basis, as evidenced in the 1947 Immigration Act, that all other peoples should feel privileged to be there.

In the poem, 'Africa – Guyana!', published in the anthology, Carew, a Guyanese-born Canadian of African ancestry writing in a multicultural moment and space, spoke directly to the question of identity and belonging:

'I am your cousin's face three centuries away!  
Where do you hail from again, my brother?  
Palm-wine drunkards chorus drunkenly.  
'Guyana! Africa – Guyana, Three Centuries Away!'<sup>4</sup>

This was not the first time Carew had tried to shake, even subvert, the Canadian imaginary. He had arrived in Canada in 1965 from Britain, to find the country's elites struggling to refashion a new identity for their federated state. The dialectic of history had begun to create, potentially, several identities and choices for a country that, from its inception, had always presented itself as white, the only authentic remnant of Europe in the Americas.<sup>5</sup>

One option was for Canada to split into two official 'European' states, each with its own separate English and French identity and culture. Another was for it to become a bilingual and bicultural country in which English and French had equal status and recognition, and which remained European in orientation. A minority argued that Canada should become multicultural, recognising the equality of all cultures and ethnicities from around the world. Canadians were, apparently, to settle for the latter – yet, in the result, they simply attempted to repackage the old power structure. The traditionally excluded groups remained excluded from power and the good life. This period was also the height of the Black Power revolution in the Americas and, for a while, Carew and his friend, the author Austin Clarke (who had encouraged him to relocate to Toronto) took on the task of articulating to Canadians the strong feelings of Blacks in the Americas and of suggesting that there must be an official place for Blackness in the emerging Canadian mosaic.

By reviewing Carew's contribution at a pivotal time in the construction of a Canadian nationalist identity, I wish, in this paper, to



interrogate some commonly held notions about who – and what – is Canadian. The need for a single, national narrative came with the relaunching of Canada as a modern state in the 1960s, as crystallised in Prime Minister Trudeau's ideal of the 'just society'. Using the egalitarian language of the day, Trudeau wanted to position Canada as just (in the Platonic and Aristotelian senses) in its domestic affairs and in its international dealings.<sup>6</sup> Two royal commissions of the 1950s and 1960s – the Massey Commission and the Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism – gave shape to the modern Canadian nation. The Massey Commission, in Litt's words, marked 'a new era in Canadian cultural affairs', proposing a 'deliberate and coordinated strategy for state sponsored cultural development' and establishing a 'broad conception of federal cultural responsibilities'.<sup>7</sup> And the process set in motion by the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, called into being to meet the potential threat of Quebec separatism and draw up a new contract between the so-called founding peoples of the nation, led, eventually to the official recognition of multiculturalism. Ethnic groups that were neither French nor English demanded that they be heard and their cultures recognised.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, the Commission did nothing itself to weaken the bilingual or bicultural character of Canada. And it took the Canadian elite until 1988, seventeen years after a policy of multiculturalism had been announced, to pass the Multiculturalism Act.

Jan Carew has consistently challenged, not the intent of these endeavours, for he has always argued strongly for diversity, but the unwillingness to depart from the traditional unifying ideology on which Canada was founded. As Jean-Marie Makang states:

[O]ne should not consider different cultural traditions as monolithic or exclusive from one another. Indeed, we can witness that throughout history cultures do not evolve in isolation or in autarky. And as states the writer and scholar, Jan Carew, there is always convergence whenever two cultures meet, whether they are sympathetic or opposing. Unfortunately, under the conditions of racism, people don't ever look for points of convergence in cultures.<sup>9</sup>

This paper, therefore, situates Carew's work in the African diaspora, and in so doing places Canadian multiculturalism squarely in a place that the elite has always resisted.

Until this national reformulation, the aboriginal presence on the northernmost tip of North America, which predated the European arrival, was ignored in the fashioning of the Canadian narrative. The arrival, too, of Black people, many of them on the earliest ships that brought the first Europeans to Canada, was erased in the history books and in popular culture, as was the presence of the slaves and Black members of the United Empire Loyalists who fled to Canada

in the 1780s after the defeat of the British in the American War of Independence.<sup>10</sup> And, in his time, Carew would have experienced the lack of official recognition of the thousands of Caribbean immigrants.

Canada, then, was recreating a national identity and national myth, but was unwilling to let go of the very traditions that had brought it to the moment of crisis. It attempted to create a new national narrative and culture through the cultural agencies funded by the government. But while the stories might have changed and, to some degree, how they were presented and by whom, the structure that underpinned them had not. The old order was redressed in exotic national and ethnic costumes borrowed from around the world, but its essence was as old as at the founding of the country itself. The power structure was still European and based on race.

Carew joined the debate with gusto, in broadcasting, publishing, theatre and in speeches and lectures, to point Canadians to other possibilities. But he and others in this struggle failed: the Canadian power structure did not become as inclusive as they proposed. Black and other minority groups still suffer from the lack of social mobility – even in the cultural agencies – supposedly promised under the new inclusive narrative. Now, as Canada tries once again to recreate its image and identity, this time as a member of the family of the Americas, and as it struggles to recognise the creolised Black and American components of its culture, Carew's more inclusive imaginary of Canada is worth re-examining.<sup>11</sup>

### **Spirit of the times**

In 1967, about the time Jan Carew was trying to raise these issues in Canada, Aimé Césaire was interviewed by the Haitian poet and militant René Despestre at the Cultural Congress of Havana, Cuba. Césaire, Martinique-born and an immigrant to France, was renowned worldwide for propagating the liberation philosophy of Negritude, a term that had been associated with the powerful secular theology of Pan-Africanism from the early 1930s and with identity politics for Blacks. Césaire used the interview to tell two stories that are still applicable today. They are stories of how a minority people should be reflected; indeed, of how members of excluded groups should fight to write themselves into the narrative of a conformist state culture, especially into the dominant literature.

The first story Césaire told was about the Other in a liberal democracy that apparently tried to find a place in the dominant culture for a voice from the periphery.

I still remember a poor little Martinican pharmacist who passed the time writing poems and sonnets which he sent to literary contests,



such as the Floral Games of Toulouse. He felt very proud when one of his poems won a prize. One day he told me that the judges hadn't even realized that his poems were written by a man of color. To put it in other words, his poetry was so impersonal that it made him proud. He was filled with pride by something I would have considered a crushing condemnation.<sup>12</sup>

This anecdote could be applied today just as easily to those Black, Native and Asian writers for whom the highest praise by various institutions and critics is the claim that they have become so Canadian that there is no trace of race or of the migrant in their writing. They have transcended – indeed negated – their race, their gender, their place of birth and even their class. The Canadian and Canadianness, even in a land of multiculturalism and professed equality of opportunity for all, are supposed to be colourless, according to the official narrative. Newcomers must agree to accept this narrative as the ticket to acceptance. This means that, beyond the dream world of equality and acceptance, such writers are internalising the ideological grounding of Canada and its institutions as essentially white and Eurocentric. This is the base and superstructure of Canadian society. Those minority writers wishing for success – in monetary terms, via the Canadian best-seller lists, the various literary prizes or even the allocation of shelf space for their books in the monopoly bookstores dotting the Canadian landscape – know by now what is required of them. They know the price, the god they must worship. They know that this universalising and homogenising Canadianness has a special place in the aesthetic of nation building and national culture, something that the father of Negritude also knew too well. For his distinctive, particularist voice still warns the minority writer with a sense of history.

But, as Césaire indicated in the interview, there are some things worth fighting for in order to avoid that crushing, colourless integration or, worse, soulless assimilation that come with the negation of history, or even a class struggle. There are times when the cup containing the bitter gall that is the drug for historical amnesia, the known method of literary success now offered to minority writers in Canada, must be refused. In my second example, Césaire masterfully tells his own story: he is the subject, the active agent.

I don't deny French influences. Whether I want to or not, as a poet I express myself in French, and clearly French literature has influenced me. But I want to emphasize very strongly that – while using as a point of departure the elements that French literature gave me – at the same time I have always strived to create a new language, one capable of communicating the African heritage. In other words, for me French was a tool that I wanted to use in developing a new means of expression. I wanted to create an Antillean



French, a black French, that while still being French, had a black character.<sup>13</sup>

To put it crudely, selling his birthright was unimaginable. Indeed, as he points out, it is not even necessary to choose. In the same aesthetic, that place to which some are demanding conformity, that third space where master and slave need no longer fight and can be themselves, there is room for Césaire to be at home in himself and with himself. He can be both Black and French without sacrificing one for the other, without having to make a choice. This is an alternative model for visible minority and immigrant writers to the one offered to them. The message for Canadian writers is the same: they, too, can be Black, Asian, Native, Gay, European and Canadian. Just as important, they are beginning to have numbers behind them, all those ambitious and struggling workers who will not be accepted into the mainstream because the elite club will never be big enough to accept everyone. But, as Carew indicates, even when there is a negation, the trace of the negated remains in the new identity. It cannot be erased totally.

In 'Africa – Guyana!', Carew made similar points, both about writing in a multicultural space where identity mattered and in remembering that a multicultural country like Canada, normatively, is supposed to recognise all beginnings and all ethnicities as equal.

Memories of two motherlands  
 – Africa – Guyana –  
 scrawled carelessly with broken spears,  
 and shattered gourds from which I once drank  
 buried their tribal secrets in the sane before my parting.<sup>14</sup>

For a time, Carew tried to confront the issues of identity and belonging in Canada and perhaps this is the reason why he was often depicted as an 'angry young man'.<sup>15</sup> He spoke out against the homogenisation being attempted in Canada under the guise of celebrating diversity. For the kind of tolerance expressed by such celebration of diversity was the sort where specific minority groups were silenced or had no official recognition. They had to assimilate themselves to a French or English prototype, one that was white.<sup>16</sup> Carew wrote articles for popular newspapers and new magazines on these themes. In 1968, he founded the literary journal *Cotopaxi: a journal of Third World resistance*, with contributing editors from France, the Soviet Union, Jamaica, England, Guyana, the US, Egypt, Ghana, Venezuela and Barbados. In the first editorial, Carew declared:

Black people were brought in their millions to the Americas and the West Indies, forcibly and in chains. So that Black Power came to this Hemisphere when the first slaves walked down the gangplanks of slave ships. The Red and the Black, the Indian and the black man,

both were flung into a new age through the trauma of their first contact with Europeans – the demoniac and the urbane, the monumentally acquisitive whites meeting the colored peoples who had a lust for living and not for profits.<sup>17</sup>

He used the state agency, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), to produce plays about the Black and Caribbean experience, thereby reminding Canadians of a reality that they had chosen to forget. And he also turned to the theatre, writing and producing *Gentlemen be Seated*, a play produced in 1967 by Toronto Workshop Productions. This achieved national recognition, eventually being sent on an international tour to the Venice Festival and to Yugoslavia by the Canadian Arts Council – the very agency set up by the federal government to create and nurture a national Canadian culture for local and international consumption. Still, it was tough work. Eventually, Carew left for the United States and for acceptance in an academy that was more open and welcoming. But he did not give up on Canada.

In an interview with fellow Guyanese-Canadian, Frank Birbalsingh, for the *Journal of Caribbean Studies*, Carew says the following of his stint in Canada:

I enjoyed writing for TV, and when I moved to Canada in 1965, I wrote *Behind God's Back*, a ninety-minute play based on a short story by Austin Clarke, for the CBC. It was broadcast in 1968 and was well received, particularly by the Black and West Indian immigrants in Canada. They had not seen true images of themselves for a sustained period on a TV screen before. Another play, which I was commissioned to write for the CBC, a modern-day version of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, in which Shylock was a Black Muslim, is still to be finished. I went off to teach at Princeton when the first draft of that play had been accepted. Then there came my twenty years as a university professor, and now I'm living in a house just outside of Guadalajara, in Mexico.<sup>18</sup>

Time and again, he returned for speaking engagements and to encourage those still in the struggle for a different Canada. And, as with the trace that is always left behind, Carew's good works and inspiration could not be obliterated. In the early 1990s, I was researching *A Place Called Heaven: the meaning of being Black in Canada* and, in interviews with Black youths, repeatedly heard stories of how Carew had inspired them. Members of one Toronto-based group in particular, who were attempting to set up a network of Black youth groups across Canada, talked about how he had shared ideas with them and, while encouraging them, also reminded them of how the tradition within which they were operating would make their task much more difficult, but also more meaningful.



Carew had always had a fondness for Canada. As he told Birbal-singh, his love of travelling and his links to Canada came from his father.

He lived at different times in the United States and Canada. He worked for a while on the Canadian Pacific Railway crossing the North American continent back and forth from Halifax to Vancouver. I remember him telling his friends during bouts of convivial drinking about the Canadian Rockies and the winter snows blanketing continental landscapes that stretched across infinite space.<sup>19</sup>

Later, I was to find out from Carew himself what a special place Toronto and Canada had for him in terms of the African diaspora. Carew would relate to me the importance of Montreal to the Marcus Garvey movement and the Black Power movement, noting that Malcolm X's mother had immigrated to Montreal from Grenada. And, as Carew relates in his book, *Ghosts in Our Blood*, Malcolm X's mother and father met at a Montreal meeting of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, of which she was the secretary. Indeed, Carew believes that a careful analysis of Garvey's letters around that time would reveal the influence of the Grenadians. These were all-important points to Carew, for they demonstrated the diasporic influences that had shaped the cultures of the Americas, and the important site Canada had become for some of these developments. Just as importantly, as he indicated consistently in his writings, the culture of Canada was as American and creolised as in any part of the hemisphere, as he indicated in 'Africa – Guyana!'

I hear the murmur of my beginnings,  
talk to the night winds, and tides,  
fishermen, dancing out of a bellows of sea and sky,  
hear me speak.<sup>20</sup>

In his writings, Carew always appealed to history and to the natural working out of a dialectic that would eventually produce justice and elevate humanity.

### **Dialectics of Canadian culture**

Canadian culture, mass and popular, was always hybrid and multi-cultural. The task for the elites, in attempting to paper over this reality in search of a formal unity, was to negotiate such tensions while retaining the privileged position that came with the historical naming of the two founding peoples of Canada.<sup>21</sup> Official culture, as defined by the elites, tried to reflect the attempts by the upper class and the privileged to maintain their control of society, while maintaining a veneer of



mass democracy. This was done within a prevailing ideology, based on liberalism and Judaeo-Christian principles, which was exclusionary of many of the visible minority groups in Canada and which venerated only the French and British experience.

Eventually, primarily as demand for labour grew, other European groups were added to the dominant coalition. This was partly due to the need for managers within industry and to the demand by some groups, such as Ukrainians, Jews and Italians, for some say in the running of the country. Economic progress and the accumulation of consumer spending power meant that members of these groups wanted to be seen as more than just workers with the social connotation that came with this label in a bourgeois society.<sup>22</sup> They wanted to assert themselves, to assume the natural and civil rights that were supposedly the due of all Canadians. Those groups making the move most easily were assimilated into the British or French model.<sup>23</sup> But so-called visible minorities were, and still are, kept from the seat of political power, the corridors of business and from the upper levels of the cultural hierarchy. Their place is as workers – for that is the only reason they or their ancestors were brought to Canada – and their cultural offerings are, at best, only those of mass or popular culture.<sup>24</sup> According to the prevailing ideology, high positions and high culture are the preserves of real Canadians and *pur lain Canadiens*. One or two from other groups will be given a pass to the higher ranks, but only on the clear understanding that these newcomers have become new men and women, incorporated into the Canadian version of high civilisation.<sup>25</sup> And even if they can never be fully Canadian or *Canadien*, they must act and behave as if they are. More importantly, they must act and behave as if they are no longer who or what they were. The terms of acceptance are deliberate and open, quite blunt – coming as they do in conditions of surrender – so that there is a deliberate choice to become part of the elite or to perish outside.

Almost four decades after they were told, the stories of Césaire and the reminders and experiences of Jan Carew and others of the 1960s are powerful signifiers of current lived experience in Canada, where visible minorities and their writers are forced to make daily choices about their identity, for whom and about whom they write. Césaire's and Carew's stories have not gone stale with time, but have been revalidated and enlivened by the times and by ongoing struggles. Can a writer who is working class, immigrant and a racial minority write about his or her everyday life in Canada and still be Canadian, still be acceptable, still be successful? Coming into full consciousness calls for a clear understanding of what is Canadian culture and literature and who is really a Canadian and a Canadian writer.

**Jan Carew and the racial minority writer**

Many times have I heard mainstream praise of Canada's minority writers, especially for their exoticism.<sup>26</sup> They are the ones giving verve to Canadian literature. They are writing about new experiences, telling new stories. However, are they really telling new stories, or are they writing in an old tradition, but which the mainstream views as exotic and new? Is it, for the mainstream, more like trying some curry, roti or jerk chicken at a Caribana carnival festival, when trying it only once is good enough? And do the mainstream elites really see this as Canadian literature or as writing about their home-lands by immigrants to Canada?

To address these issues it is worth taking a look at what a theorist like Raymond Williams has to say. Williams was analysing the situation in Britain, but his observations and comments are relevant to Canada, especially in terms of a discussion on the role of an avant-garde in literature and how it interfaces with the dominant culture. Williams sees the avant-garde as consisting of those artists willing to challenge accepted norms and ideologies. Such artists are at the leading edge of modernity; it is they who make people uncomfortable, make them re-examine fixed positions. They would be the ones to introduce new thinking, especially in a multicultural society, which is itself a high point of the liberal pluralism that Williams advocates. But, as Williams notes, the casualty rates are high for those challenging entrenched positions. At one point in his essay, 'The politics of the avant-garde', Williams says:

It is not really surprising that so many artists – including, ironically, at later stages of their careers, many avant-garde artists – become in this sense good and successful bourgeois: at once attentive to control of their own production and property, and – which mattered more in public presentation – ultimately apotheoses of that central bourgeois figure: that sovereign individual. This is still today the small change of conventional artistic self-presentation.<sup>27</sup>

Although he was looking at the avant-garde moment in European modernism, what Williams has to say is equally true of Canada, which has always presented itself as part of civilising modernity. Despite much talk about the multicultural nature of Canada, the country, through its elite, has been attempting to homogenise Canadian literature within a bourgeois culture. While appearing to celebrate difference, behind the scenes the Canadian establishment has been actively stripping from the Canadian canon that which does not subscribe to the elitist notion of Canada. This is a Canada with its minorities in their place, essentially that of workers. When they applied to come to Canada, immigrants, it was assumed, knew they were selling themselves



into a form of colonialism – a Canadian version of colonialism. Race and racism are very obvious manifestations of this.

Writers, as Bourdieu argues, are products of their society, for they share a common social capital with all others in that society. Their works have meaning only in the sense that they have social meaning, in that readers and writers operate from the same point of departure. This is significant here on two accounts, in that Canadian writers write out of the physical and social environment of which they are products, and minority writers have to operate and perform out of the culture and environments that made them. The Canadian landscape must include minority groups, for it is a landscape that has seen major demographic change – and a reality that needs to be captured in literature if that literature is to be a genuine representation of lived experience within the national territory. Therefore, for minority writers to reject – or to be expected to reject – their race, migrant status, class or gender, would mean, for them, that they would not be writing out of an authentic environment. Moreover, Canadian writing cannot be a true product of its society if dominant groups try to maintain a sanitised version of the national narrative that excludes the hardships of those who are on the periphery.

In the first editorial for *Cotopaxi* (named after two active volcanoes in the Andes), Carew put the task of minority writers this way:

For, delving into the American time-space syndrome, the heartland of the twin continents, man's primeval roots in this Hemisphere of Terror, one is at once compelled to break away from that cosy history which begins with Columbus discovering America, and to search for the more fundamental creative truths, not in historical, but in geological time – the age of a river, a forest, a volcano and the first people who lived there.<sup>28</sup>

### **Nationalism and literature**

These issues of acceptance and identity are played out every day in bookstores across the country, in public and university libraries and in the homes of the relatively small book-buying public in Canada. Sarah Corse took a look at the Canadian literary establishment and compared it with that of the US. Her study looked at how books were listed on the national bestseller lists in Canada and the US and which writers received most of the prestigious literary awards and prizes. Using Bourdieu as her theoretical point of departure, she found little difference between the two countries, with elitist high culture in a privileged position over popular and mass culture. Both national literatures are predicated on the idea of a national dream; in Canada's case, what she calls 'a literary preoccupation with the



embedding of individuals in relationship, the concomitant constraint this exercises on individuals, and, above all, the social identity of individuals'.<sup>29</sup> National literatures, she argues, have traditionally been understood as reflections of the unique character and experience of the nation. They are said to capture the 'collective unconsciousness' of a specific collection of people. This collective unconsciousness is supposedly marked by a distinctive set of values, tensions, myths and psychological foci. But, Corse suggests, this is not the case. There is very little that is natural and of the collective unconsciousness involved in a national literature. Such literatures are ideological tools:

National literatures exist not because they arise 'naturally', but because they are an integral part of the process by which nation-states create themselves and distinguish themselves from other nations. Huxley, among others, remarked on this situation when he wrote: 'nations are to a very large extent invented by their poets and novelists' . . . the [literary] canon is chosen, not born.<sup>30</sup>

In other words, a literary canon is socially constructed and results from the interplay of historical forces. Moreover, the canon reflects the tastes and social locations of those who create and maintain canons. This means that some texts and some social conditions will be ignored, while others are emphasised. Finally, Corse suggests that this entire process of acceptance reflects a reciprocal relationship with the 'social' world which affects nation building, influencing the imagination of what that is and what it stands for.

Carew seemed to have had a similar exercise in mind in the 1960s. In a note to accompany a selection of poems entitled 'Poetry of black revolution' in the journal *Cotopaxi*, Carew wrote about the rebirth taking place across North America, as a creativity captured not only in the notion of national identity by the elites but also by marginalised people in ghettos.

Behind the facade of the ghettos is a turbulent new creative life. Self-help is replacing despair and the impulse to a blind inchoate rage is giving way slowly to a profound need amongst black people to rediscover the history of themselves by themselves, to create new institutions and to herald in a new epoch of progress through unity, self-help and determination. To discover this in the wake of the successive rebellions is like finding new sturdy plants growing out of the ashes.<sup>31</sup>

Two years after publishing these words, Carew was to see Canada enter its most precarious moment as a modern liberal democratic state. Fearful of a collapse of civil society, the government that would eventually introduce official multiculturalism and elevate notions of tolerance, invoked the War Measures Act to suspend civil

liberties when it appeared that violence spawned by racial and ethnic differences in Quebec would rip the nation into two. The work on the construction of a new nationality was to become even more urgent. But, by then, Carew had slipped across the border to the United States, though his voice still lingered behind as a reminder and as an aspiration.

## References

I wish to give special thanks to Sharon Morgan Lewis and Joy G. Carew for their invaluable assistance.

- 1 Ayana Black (ed.), *Fiery Spirits & Voices: Canadian writers of African descent* (Toronto, Harper Collins, 2000). (*Fiery Spirits* had been published separately in 1994.)
- 2 David Bennett (ed.), *Multicultural States: rethinking difference and identity* (London, Routledge, 1998).
- 3 In contrast to this boast, there is an emerging body of research that shows the glaring inequalities between visible racial minorities and white Canadians. See, for example, 'Poverty linked to skin colour: visible minority immigrants make less, study says' in the *Toronto Star* (24 March 2000). 'Visible minority immigrants have a higher unemployment rate, lower average income and are more likely to live in poverty than their white counterparts, according to Canadian census data from 1991 to 1996. "After five years of economic recovery, we are still looking at a higher representation of visual minorities below the poverty lines," said University of Toronto sociologist Edward Harvey.' Even more pointed is the study that shows that, of all the minority groups, blacks – whether immigrant or Canadian born – are the worst affected. See Derek Hum and Wayne Simpson, 'Wage opportunities for visible minorities in Canada', *Statistics Canada*, catalogue no. 98-17. 'Blacks receive 19% less than Canadians who are not a member of a visible minority, members of the Indo-Pakistani group receive about 13% less, Chinese receive about 12% less, and members of the non-Chinese Oriental group receive about 16% less.' (p.13) As this report shows, the situation is even worse for black men. 'There are significant wage disadvantages for Black men (about 21%). Among Canadian born men, Blacks have a statistically significant wage disadvantage of about 24%, which is comparable with the results for foreign-born black men.' (p. 28)
- 4 *Fiery Spirits & Voices*, op. cit., p. 59.
- 5 This point was emphasised by the different paths that Empire Loyalists took from the American Revolution of 1776. The loyalists went to Canada to continue a European tradition and history that the American revolutionaries had rejected. See Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1992) and Lawrence H. Leder, *The Colonial Legacy: volume 1 – loyalist historians* (New York, Harper & Row, 1971).
- 6 See P. E. Trudeau, *The Essential Trudeau* (Toronto, McClelland, 1998), p. 4. These sentiments are captured in official government documents, such as 'Immigrants and civic participation: contemporary policy and research issues', issued by the Canadian government department of Heritage and Multiculturalism in 1997. It noted that, since 1971, the Canadian government has been interested in ensuring that its policies address the challenges of ethnic, racial, linguistic and religious diversity. The fundamentals goals of this approach are: a) Identity – fostering a society that recognises, respects and reflects a diversity of cultures such that people of all backgrounds feel a sense of belonging and attachment to Canada; b) Civic



Participation – developing, among Canada’s diverse people, active citizens with both the opportunity and capacity to participate in shaping the future of their communities and their country; c) Social Justice – building a society that ensures fair and equitable treatment and that respects the dignity of and accommodates people of all origins.

- 7 Paul Litt, *The Muses, the Masses and the Massey Commission* (Toronto, Toronto University Press), p. 4.
- 8 As Kenneth McRoberts shows, these attacks on bilingualism and biculturalism caught the Commission off guard, so that eventually the commissioners felt obliged to produce a full volume called *The Cultural Contribution of Other Groups* which proposed a ‘series of initiatives such as anti-discrimination measures, equal access of all immigrants to citizenship, teaching of non-official languages in schools, elimination of restrictions on non-official languages in private and public broadcasting, and support for organizations fostering “the arts and letters of cultural groups other than French”’. (K. McRoberts, *Misconceiving Canada: the struggle for national unity* (Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 123.)
- 9 Jean-Marie Makang, ‘African diaspora’s perspective of multiculturalism and individual identity: a response to Jorn Braman’, *Philosophical Forum* (26 October 1999), <http://www.frostburg.edu/dept/phil/forum/Multicult2.htm>
- 10 See Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: a history* (Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1971) and James W. St. G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: the search for a promised land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone 1783–1870* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1992).
- 11 One of the clearest signs of the remapping of the Canadian identity was the country’s hosting (Quebec City, April 2001) of a summit by thirty-four leaders of the Americas which was intended to produce a Free Trade Agreement of the Americas by 2005. Opening this meeting, Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien spoke of the American family of nations.
- 12 Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York, Monthly Review, 1972), p. 69.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- 14 *Fiery Spirits & Voices*, op. cit., p. 58.
- 15 Between 1965 and 1969, Carew was often depicted in Canadian literature and newspapers as an angry Black Power activist. The following example is taken from a review of *Harlequin in Hogtown: George Luscombe & Toronto Workshop Productions*. The book and the review recalled the early days of the alternative theatre in Toronto under a tyrant-like Luscombe. ‘Jack Winter, Luscombe’s dramaturge, resigned from *Mr Bones*, a minstrel show about black oppression, and was replaced by the Guyanese-born writer Jan Carew, who ended up storming into Luscombe’s office and tearing up a phone book in rage and frustration.’ Keith Garebian, ‘Revolutionary Harlequin’, *Books in Canada* (Vol. 25, no. 2, March, 1996).
- 16 See Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: liberal theory of minority rights* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995), for a discussion of the ‘Anglo’ and ‘Franco’ conformity models that were central to Canadian citizenship and the assimilation of immigrants up until the 1960s and the advent of multiculturalism.
- 17 Jan Carew, ‘The Third World in the Americas’, *Cotopaxi* (Vol. 1, no.1, Fall 1968).
- 18 Frank Birbalsingh, ‘Jan Carew interview’, *Journal of Caribbean Studies* (1988).
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Fiery Spirits & Voices*, op. cit., p. 58.
- 21 The Canadian Constitution states that there are two founding peoples, a clear signal of the exclusive nature of elites who drafted and implement this document. This designation became a major problem in the 1980s when there were two failed attempts at amending the Canadian Constitution. The Meech Lake Agreement and then the Charlottetown Agreement failed largely because the process was deemed undemocratic. The question of who is a Canadian was at the heart of



- this discourse. Another example of the power of the British and French is the interminable debate over national unity, whether Quebec can separate from Canada, a debate that usually excludes visible minorities and immigrants – except during the separation referendums when they always vote overwhelmingly for Canada. Demographics seem to suggest that if minorities maintain this voting practice, Quebec will never separate from Canada. Yet the debate continues between the old-stock Canadians, even though the new-stock Canadians have made their choice.
- 22 There is a body of literature that deals with the assimilation of Canadian immigrants. This literature argues that first-generation immigrants are concerned primarily with survival and adaptability. They want a job and good schooling for their children. They have very little interest in the politics and culture of the new land. Therefore, it is from the second generation onwards at the earliest that members of the 'immigrant' community begin to get involved in politics and culture in any meaningful way. See Morton Weinfeld's research papers 'A preliminary stock-taking on immigration research in Canada', and 'Immigrant and visible minority associational movements in Toronto'.
  - 23 For a fuller discussion, see Will Kymlicka, *Finding Our Way: rethinking ethno-cultural relations in Canada* (Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1998), and *Misconceiving Canada*, op. cit.
  - 24 That Canadians are, by definition, hewers of wood and drawers of water has reached folkloric proportions. This was supposedly an early reference to the fact that Canada was primarily a colonial outpost, rich in natural resources that were shipped to metropolitan centres, and that it had no authentic or national culture. The Canadian elites wanted to change this concept. They wanted to show that they had a culture – even if they had to manufacture it – but they still needed wood to be hewn and water to be drawn, so they imported other people to do the dirty work, while real Canadians made and enjoyed 'culture'.
  - 25 This claim was made before the Massey Commission (which essentially charted the road map for the creation of a national culture) by university professors, the clergy and 'leading pillars of society' from several volunteer and community organisations who appeared as expert witnesses.
  - 26 This was very noticeable in the reviews of Jamaican-Canadian Olive Senior's novel, *Discerners of Hearts*. Before coming to Canada, Senior had developed an international reputation, including the winning of the Commonwealth literature prize. However, in Canada, reviews and radio and television interviews concentrated more on her 'exotic' use of language – which, as she argued, was natural language in Jamaica – and spent very little time on the content or aesthetic values of her novel.
  - 27 Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism* (London, Verso, 1994), p. 55.
  - 28 'The Third World in the Americas', op. cit.
  - 29 Sarah M. Corse, *Nationalism and Literature: the politics of culture in Canada and the United States* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 7.
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  - 31 'The Third World in the Americas', op. cit.



FRANK BIRBALSINGH

## Race, colour and class in *Black Midas*

Carew's main achievement in his first published novel, *Black Midas*<sup>1</sup> is to illuminate the inner workings, relationships and structure of Guyanese society, in all its colonial and multicultural variety, diversity and complexity. As such, it is one of the earliest novels (1958) to provide reliable insight into that milieu.

It is true that Edgar Mittelholzer, in novels such as *The Life and Death of Sylvia* (1953) and his *Kaywana* trilogy (1950s), had given a broad outline of the principal Guyanese social forms; but the interest in *Sylvia* was mainly psychological, and the *Kaywana* books were almost entirely historical; and in neither case was much attention paid to society in the twentieth century. Mittelholzer's novels supplied basic, historical details that had shaped Guyanese society over three centuries, when slaves were brought from Africa to work on sugar plantations in a colony ruled firstly by the Dutch and, after 1803, by the British. Since sugar was the main product of the colony, the structure of the sugar plantation became the dominant influence in Guyana's social formation as in everything else; for as white (European) plantation owners held sway over black (African) slaves until 1834 when

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*Race & Class*

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slavery was abolished, so colonial society retained a structure in which whites were the dominant class, educated and well to do, with blacks making up the bulk of the working population, and a small group of brown people of mixed European and African descent making up the middle class. After 1834, when the freed Africans no longer wished to work on the plantations on European terms, Chinese, Portuguese and mostly Indians were brought into the colony as substitute labourers. Guyana's population therefore consists of descendants from all these groups. Whatever other merits *Black Midas* may claim as a novel, it can be relied on for accurately representing the role played by the historic factors of race, colour and class in social relationships between all these ethnic groups in Guyana.

\* \* \*

The hero and narrator of the novel, Aron Smart, is known as 'Shark' because he 'had small white teeth and a shark grin'. (p. 5) This process of naming through raw, physical detail illustrates the unusual importance of physical attributes in the society to which Aron belongs. Aron is black. He is also poor, because poverty is historically linked to the experience of black people as former slaves in his society. Moreover, with such a variety of races and inevitable racial mixing among them, shades of colour come to assume great importance. What *Black Midas* offers is a fictional portrait of Guyanese colonial society in which class or rank is assigned to individuals or groups according to factors of race, ethnicity or colour.

By historical sanction, a lighter shade was taken to indicate higher economic status, better education and, consequently, higher social rank. Yet although this system of social organisation was pervasive and rigid in a general sense, it was often open to fluid interpretation. Aron, for example, is regarded as 'not too black' (p. 63) by Indra, his first lover but, when she is sexually aroused, Indra calls Aron 'Black Beast! Black Brute!'. (p. 69) The abusive term 'nigger man' is also applied to Aron's friend Santos who is presumably not fully black, but a brown mixture of Portuguese and African. In Santos's case, the abusive connotation of the term takes precedence over colour, because it is Santos's moral conduct (not colour) that is being denounced. Similarly, despite his status as a member of the professional, middle class, the brown lawyer George Kendall is also denounced as 'nigger man' because of his dishonesty and sharp practice.

Evidently, while race and colour are basic factors in determining class, they also determine morality on a perverse scale of values in which white represents the highest social class and moral good, while black signifies the lowest rank and worst possible conduct. Even an obeah man or traditional priest tries to exploit this system by demanding higher fees for his services when hired to exorcise Aron's house

from the spirit of its former owner who was white: 'white man spirit harder to catch than black'. (p. 193) Nor should this value system be regarded as some peculiar Caribbean aberration, when it is nothing more than the product of European imperialism, which dominated most of the world and established a universal, Eurocentric system of values that still persists in former colonies long after the formal demise of imperialism or colonialism during the twentieth century. The events in *Black Midas* undoubtedly carry the universal stamp of Eurocentric imperial domination, but since they occur in a British Caribbean colony, these events also reflect the specific values and special peculiarities of Caribbean history and culture which are indelibly marked by slavery and indenture, the displacement of populations chiefly from Africa and Asia, and the exploitation of their labour by white colonial rulers.

The complexity of the society thus created is admirably captured by Carew. Here is his description of the ethnic variety on display in a typical, everyday, market scene in Guyana:

Crowds poured in and out . . . people of every race and colour on earth – Chinese, Negroes (Africans), East Indians, Europeans, Syrians, Amerindians . . . There were Negroes with Chinese eyes, people with woolly hair and Hindu features, white men with faces which looked as if they had been rubbed in the dust of a burnt-earth road, swarthy men with grey blue eyes and kinky hair, blonde Negroes and pale faced Amerindians. (p. 93)

One individual, who had a 'scalded brick-red complexion' and brown and woolly hair, is described as coming 'out of a cauldron of racial mixtures'. (p. 197)

In addition to racial mixing, colonial history functioned through a system of stratification whereby certain ethnic groups, even if they were not deliberately assigned, generally felt suited to specific geographical areas. Africans appeared mostly in cities and certain villages, while Indians largely occupied the countryside and a few villages. And, to top it all, there was a clearly perceived cultural divide between the city and countryside in which the city alone afforded modernity, sophistication and what was considered civilised living. Thus, society in colonial Guyana was stratified by race, colour, class and geographical location, and in *Black Midas* this social stratification enables us to observe clear links between stages in Aron's career, and the corresponding social levels or classes that he passes through.

We first see Aron as an orphan living with his grandparents in the village of Mahaica which 'was only twenty miles away from Georgetown [the capital] but when I was a boy, it could have been two thousand'. (p. 200) In his youth, marginalised by blackness, poverty and distance from Georgetown – the centre of government as well as



culture – Aron does manual work on a road gang, and can only contemplate a bleak future. But, like Pip in Dickens's *Great Expectations*, he is befriended by a mysterious benefactor who pays for him to be educated until he passes the Junior Cambridge exam, and is apprenticed to a medical doctor to study pharmacy. This wholly unexpected intervention from an unknown source completely transforms Aron's career. Education is the first step that he takes to change his direction away from the certain bleakness that lies ahead. Not only does he pass an exam, but he will also live and work with an educated, professional gentleman. Since the doctor's house is in Eccles, this also means that Aron is moving closer to Georgetown than Mahaica.

Throughout the period of Aron's education, the identity of his benefactor remains hidden but, while he is at the doctor's house, he discovers that the source of his good fortune is an Englishman named Julian Beauchamp. To Aron, Beauchamp is a 'white grandfather' or a 'shadow god'. (p. 55) He also says of Beauchamp, 'he was a deity, not a man'. (p. 55) In other words, by Aron's own account, so ingrained were cultural patterns and social practices, only a supernatural agency would have the power to lift him out of the clutches of colonial society, or at least provide him with the means to escape those clutches by himself. And, true enough, Beauchamp's rationale for helping Aron does read somewhat like a fairy tale: it turns out that Beauchamp once employed Aron's father Joe Smart when he (Beauchamp) was a mining engineer in the gold and diamond fields in the interior of Guyana. Joe Smart then died in a mining accident for which Beauchamp felt some responsibility, if not guilt. Hence his generosity to Aron; when Aron finally meets Beauchamp, he receives a further gift of 480 dollars. At this stage, Aron is ready for the second turning point in his career. Beauchamp's latest gift enables him to leave his apprenticeship, and follow in his father's footsteps by venturing into the gold and diamond fields of the interior.

\* \* \*

As part of the Amazon jungle that spreads into neighbouring territories such as Venezuela and Brazil, the interior of colonial Guyana was a law unto itself. For one thing, it was very thinly populated (mainly by Amerindians) and, for another, it was not subject to the social stratification of other areas of the country. As Beauchamp himself describes it: 'There were no barriers of race in the jungles. Every individual was master of his fate as long as he had the strength and cunning.' (p. 86) Hence the interior is probably the best place for Aron's true qualities to emerge, unconfined by the social restrictions of the coastal areas, with their burdens of rank, hierarchy and taboos inherited from colonial history. In the interior, as Beauchamp hints, only raw, human qualities count, and Carew's description of the brutal manners of the



'porkknockers', as the miners or prospectors are called, is one of the triumphs of *Black Midas*. Their names alone convey the daring, tenuous quality of their lives: Lockjaw Kirton, Dead-an-live Morrison, Slackfoot, Ruction Daniel. These were men who lived hard, close to nature, courting risk and danger in everything they did, and never knowing from day to day whether they would strike it rich or go under; live or die. Carew's description of their abandoned desperation is unsparing: 'In their drunken sprees night after night, they cursed and fought one another like wild bulls on the Llanos.' (p. 116) Like Aron, these were mostly black or brown men and, again like him, they were driven by the frustrations that restricted them in colonial society to gamble their very lives and take on all the risks and dangers of the interior, purely on the slender chance that they might strike it rich.

Aron does strike it rich, developing as well a warm, nurturing relationship with Bullah Daniels, an older man who takes a paternal interest in him because he had once known Aron's father. Aron also benefits from the love of Belle, a prostitute he had first met in Georgetown. These relationships provide Aron with a level of domestic comfort although, like his fellow porkknockers, he still faces risk and danger every day. There are the natural dangers of the forest: one man is killed by a falling tree and another by shocks from an electric eel. Then there are the physical rivalries of desperate men who continually brawl at night, running the risk of severely injuring themselves or others. Even more deadly are the internal rivalries and hostile passions sparked by the heat of competition and the frenzied pursuit of elusive riches. Santos, for example, once Aron's close friend and adviser, is gradually consumed with envy over Aron's growing prosperity, and joins with Aron's Uncle Dolly to break into the shop run by Bullah Daniels and empty the safe which contains the porkknockers' savings. As the most successful porkknocker, Aron's loss is greatest and, in an environment where jungle justice prevails, he and Bullah set off to hunt down the two thieves. Later, Uncle Dolly is shot and, in trying to escape, is devoured by cannibal fish, while Santos loses his mind, wanders off and is drowned. Aron recovers his wealth, but the reader does not forget the violent circumstances in which it was obtained, away from the civilised world of law and order. The truth is that, because of his ethnic background, he was unlikely to prosper, let alone become rich in the 'civilised' world.

Luck plays a prominent role in Aron's prosperity. For, though he deserves credit for struggling in an environment of jungle law where only the fittest survive, he is the only one of his group of porkknockers to become rich. But since his wealth is worthless in the forest, he returns to Georgetown, accompanied by Bullah and Belle. In the beginning, his plan is to 'live quietly with Belle, to spend wisely, to buy land and settle down to farming it'. (p. 181) But on his arrival in Georgetown, he is

greeted as 'the black man who had found his eldorado', and he soon comes to realise that he has to live 'according to what people expected'. (p. 181) So, almost without realising it, he is gradually drawn into a lifestyle that is altogether different from what he wants.

He begins by buying a large house formerly owned by a white man, and his first impression of living in it is: 'There was I, a black man from a village, stepping into the shoes of the great ones.' (p. 184) The house is not simply a place to live in: it is public testimony to the role that Aron is playing. It is an unnatural role, consisting of posing and pretentiousness, as is noticed by Belle, who tells Aron: 'You is a village boy, black as night; the white and brown man shoes en't never going to fit you.' (p. 187) By virtue of his wealth, Aron is playing a middle- or upper-class role to which, by local or historical convention, he is not at all suited. And neither he nor Belle nor Bullah is even comfortable in the new house. Its function is mainly to serve as a symbol of Aron's wealth. He is told, for instance, that: 'the black people expecting you to make a show', (p. 198) suggesting that Aron's house and new lifestyle are not symbols merely of his own achievement, but of possibilities open to his fellow black countrymen as well. He himself acknowledges: 'I began to learn that money made the Georgetown folk colour-blind. If you spent enough of it they treated you like a white man, even if you were as black as the ace of spades.' (p. 199) Aron, then, is acutely aware of race and colour and of the unjust social order these values have imposed in colonial Guyana, yet his is not a voice of protest. He does not emerge as a social reformer: it is as if he is bemused by the discovery that his wealth could help him to transcend racial and social barriers.

Indeed, Aron is so bemused that he recognises neither the pretentious artificiality of his new lifestyle nor the degree to which it has alienated Bullah and Belle, the two people closest and dearest to him. He is therefore shocked when Bullah and Belle eventually spurn his affluence and move out of his house. As a literary hero who is inwardly corrupted by outward success, Aron is far from original, but when *Black Midas* first appeared, the story of his rise from poverty to near the top of Caribbean colonial society represented something new in Caribbean literature. Even if he cannot see it himself, the fragility of Aron's success is recognised not only by Bullah and Belle, but by others who are less well disposed to him. George Kendall, for example, reveals that although middle-class or professional people, brown or black, may appear to idolise Aron, they secretly envy and hate him:

They hate you, man, every mother's son of them, the same way that the white man hates them. They feel it's a shame you should have all that money. They'll cringe and lick your boots while you've got it, and when it's gone they'll pass you on the street. (p. 217)



Kendall is realistic, even cynical, although he is careful not to include himself among those who envy and hate Aron. He appears to have made an objective study of colonial society: 'The white man is like a tiger orchid, high up, feeding on us [descendants of slaves and indentured labourers] never sinking roots in the mud.' (p. 225) By his analysis, Kendall suggests that the social aloofness of white colonial rulers has had a divisive effect on subject people by encouraging them to aspire to aloofness themselves, and thus end up fighting among themselves. He describes colonised people as crabs scrambling to get out of the mud of colonial misery, and simply pulling each other down.

With such insight into the perverse ethics of colonial social organisation, it is perhaps not surprising that Kendall should himself prove to be the cause of Aron's downfall for, just as Aron's economic fortunes have risen with surprising and rapid ease, so they fall with equal abruptness. At the height of his prosperity, Aron is tricked by Kendall and another equally crooked lawyer into making a huge investment that collapses, leaving him in financial ruin. At the same time, Aron's young lover Beryl dies during a failed abortion, and he is in emotional crisis as well. Although Bullah returns to give him moral support, Aron is faced with returning to the poverty from which he began, and decides to try his luck once more in the interior. This time, however, his luck does not hold, and he has an accident in which both legs are crushed and one has to be amputated. Thus, despite his brief exercise in social climbing, Aron ends where he began – black and poor.

\* \* \*

It is clear from the start of *Black Midas* that Aron is predestined, by birth and upbringing, to a life of poverty and hard, manual work. He is rescued from this fate, first, by a mysterious 'white godfather' and, second, by extraordinary good luck as a porkknocker. In both cases, Aron's own contribution to his prosperity is limited – he benefits more from the intervention of other agencies. Beauchamp's intervention on his behalf is a bolt from the blue whose capricious nature is emphasised by the fact that, by the time Aron actually meets him, Beauchamp is in an insane asylum.

The fact that Aron depends either on luck, or on a white man who goes mad, underlines his passive role in the novel. It suggests that he is used by the author chiefly as a barometer for measuring the effect of basic factors such as race, colour and class on Guyanese society. At no time does Aron express strong political feelings, for example, to challenge social injustice or inequality. Both the rise and fall of his economic fortunes are accepted tamely, with impassive calm. Had Aron shown strong feelings at any stage, he could be taken as a martyr figure who bears the suffering that has, historically, been the



lot of all non-white Guyanese. That is not the case. Instead, what Carew has achieved in *Black Midas* and through the portrayal of Aron's passivity, is the depiction of the inner workings of race, colour and class in colonial Guyana.

## Reference

- 1 Jan Carew, *Black Midas* (London, Secker & Warburg, 1958). All quotations are taken from this edition.

the three faces of British racism



With contributions from: A. Sivanandan on globalism and racism  
■ Lee Bridges on the criminal justice system  
■ Gareth Peirce on the Terrorism Act ■ Frances Webber on the Human Rights Act ■ Liz Fekete on the emergence of xeno-racism  
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# Explorations into the 'feminism' of Jan Carew

*Images play a crucial role in defining and controlling the political and social power to which both individuals and marginalized groups have access. The deeply ideological nature of imagery determines not only how other people think about us but how we think about ourselves.*

– Pratibha Parmar<sup>1</sup>

*All peoples have the right to share the waters of the River of Life and to drink from their own cups but our cups have been broken.*

– an anonymous Afro-Carib woman<sup>2</sup>

*Our problem today, as we contemplate the challenge of culture and development, is, first of all, a conceptual one. We are the victims of a fragmented vision.*

– Jan Carew<sup>3</sup>

Jan Carew, artist, writer, political activist, historian, academic, and storyteller, has never been shy about blending art and politics. For

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him, art that avoids the political is hollow – form without substance. Art cannot be separate from life, and life itself is political. As he puts it, ‘I don’t make any differences between literature and politics. I think that is an absolute fantasy . . . my own thing is to write with clarity to illuminate the struggle.’<sup>4</sup>

A central feature of Carew’s desire to ‘illuminate the struggle’ has been to give voice to the most marginalised in society and to use whatever device available – whether it be the essay, the novel, the children’s story, the historical text or the podium – as a tool for accomplishing this goal. A particular strength comes from his sense of personal history, the familial line from which he draws inspiration and role models:

My great-gran Belle used to tell me that there are ghosts in our blood, and that we’re lucky because the lowliest, the ones who suffer the most in the world of the living, are always top dogs in the spirit world . . . African and Amerindian spirits rule that spirit world. And those ancestral spirits whisper warnings whenever we’re about to do something reckless or foolhardy.<sup>5</sup>

For him, these ancestral spirits are the fount from which he draws strength and purpose. They provide both comfort and security; but, in return, he must respond and let them ‘speak’ through his works. That women, as some of the most marginalised, are of central concern is not inconceivable. Ever mindful of the key role women played in his life, Carew seeks to give voice to those historically silenced by patriarchal tradition.

In the early 1980s, Jan Carew received a letter, inviting him to participate in an international women’s conference to be held in Scandinavia. This major gathering was to bring together women from across the globe, intellectuals and practitioners alike, to debate strategies for addressing the many concerns of women in the final quarter of the twentieth century. When Carew wrote to them, stating that he was, in fact, a man, not a woman – but still welcomed the invitation – it was withdrawn. Regrettably, at the time, women still tended to be self-segregating and avoided having any male presence at their gatherings, for fear that this might influence their deliberations. Perhaps now, as women have come to understand the value of strategic alliances in which men, formerly perceived as adversaries, can become allies, they might have appreciated Carew’s contributions. Nonetheless, the fact that they invited Jan Carew stemmed, no doubt, from having read his work. They appreciated the fact that Carew offers women not as ‘backdrop’ to the scenes of human life, but as integral players. It is this feature – what I term the ‘feminism’ of Jan Carew – that sets his work apart from others of his generation of Caribbean writers.



### Parameters of analysis

Jan Carew's feminism is defined not only by its sensitivity to the role of women in society, but also by a special effort to counter the prevailing perception that the contributions of women fall within a narrow range and are limited. This is particularly troublesome when considering the roles played by women in developing and less industrialised sectors. I offer two brief examples as a means of defining the parameters by which to look at Jan Carew's work.

In 1980, I was invited to conduct research in Geneva, under the auspices of the Institute for International Labour Studies (IILS), on the role of women and agricultural technology in the Third World. Some of my findings were then presented as part of an article I did for the IILS's journal *Travail et Société*, entitled, 'A note on women and agricultural technology in the Third World'.<sup>6</sup> What became transparently evident was that women, in spite of having the primary responsibility for the sustenance and maintenance of the family (and, hence, community), had been systematically overlooked in development schemes. In fact, the value of their contributions had been systematically devalued by the major international development organisations. The typical pattern showed that the majority of the development schemes put forth by predominantly male governments, and supported by predominantly male-led international organisations, had focused attention on men as wage earners whose labour had been directed to cash-crop production. Women were not being inducted into the newer agricultural technologies but were being left as the primary subsistence providers of the family unit. Not only was the survival of the family unit under threat, but the development of the various communities in which these projects were sited was being seriously foreshortened. This has been one of Carew's major campaigns: to pull women and girls in from the margins and bring to the fore a more realistic and holistic view of the complex and interrelated human systems found in developing societies. The re-evaluation of previously conceived perceptions of women's worth in society not only strengthens their position *vis à vis* that society, but strengthens the whole in relation to its ability to confront the challenges facing it.

A second parameter can be drawn from one of the central themes raised by feminists such as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese. While the women's movement and the rise of feminist activism have brought improvements in the lives of Euro-American and European women, they have neglected to respond to the very real concerns of women of colour and the majority of those living in the less industrialised sectors of the global community. Fox-Genovese, in her work *Feminism Without Illusions: a critique of individualism*,<sup>7</sup> warned that western women were, in fact, in danger of suffering from a dual myopia, of both

'paternalism' and Eurocentrism, and that 'the dominant tendency . . . inadvertently tends toward countering the dominant image of the elite, white male self with complementary images of an elite, white female self'.<sup>8</sup> This has been a continual problem. Western feminists have tended to measure other women's 'worthiness' from the perspective of their western value system, thus arrogating to themselves the role of 'spokespersons' for the lesser lights. Jan Carew's brand of feminism – sensitive to these kinds of slights – gives voice to the most marginalised of women, contending that, given the opportunity, the eloquence of their words and actions is compelling enough to sway opinion and inspire others.

### **The power of strong female archetypes**

An archetypal figure that appears over and over again in Jan Carew's work is the Afro-Carib woman. The second quote at the beginning of this piece comes from her. She rises up as a truth-teller, a sage and a guide. Patterning her and her ilk after a combination of his great-grandmother Belle and his mother, Carew pays homage to these powerful female figures as they weave in and out of his wide-ranging work, stretching from stories, novels, plays and on into his essays, historical treatises, memoirs and even works for children and young adults.

Jan Carew's recollections of his own family offer some intriguing insights into the early examples from which he draws. In an interview with Frank Birbalsingh in Toronto, conducted in the late 1980s, he stated: '[My mother] was the dominant figure in my life, in the lives of my sister[s] and myself. She saw that we were educated because my father did not really care whether we were educated or not.'<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere he wrote that:

Her teachings helped me to grow up without being burdened with male chauvinist and sexist fantasies that were the order of the day. She believed all men, regardless of race, color, creed, or nationality, were her inferiors. And yet, she succeeded in making me feel more of a man than I might have done if I had been brought up on the illusion my maleness made me innately superior to all females.<sup>10</sup>

and that:

My great-grandmother of a hundred and twenty years illuminated for me with her ribald and unforgettable stories and her ancient and indestructible African wisdom a past replete with a kaleidoscope of odd ancestors. There was Manaharva and Chantoba (the one male and other female) both Carib caciques from the Kaituma Triangle. [Carew would eventually name his last daughter, Shantoba, after this earlier ancestor] . . . I always thought that my great-



grandmother looked like God with her lily-white cottonwool hair, her dark face, and her laughing eyes as she occasionally sat erect and still as a lean and handsome black Buddha, smoking a white clay pipe.<sup>11</sup>

This same figure of his great-grandmother would later appear as a god-like personage in two plays. One, set in Guyana, *Peace Play*,<sup>12</sup> has her as the central figure in a trio of gods. In another, *Put the Gods on Trial*, she appears in inner-city Chicago:

The time is today. The setting is an empty lot in Chicago's South Side. There are disordered clumps of weeds, a few sycamore, copper beech and cottonwood saplings, tattered pieces of plastic cling to the weeks like rags hung out to dry, there are old cans and an assortment of debris . . . In the center of this empty lot is a well with a large dripping spigot. The water has made the weeds and the saplings near the well look greener and healthier than the rest. To the right of the well is a middle-aged woman. Her snow-white hair stands out in sharp contrast to her midnight countenance. She is squatting on her haunches African-style and smoking a long-stemmed white clay pipe . . . The woman, with her anthracite face that has beaten against many years, and remained relatively unmarked, has an air of authority, of calmness and of composure, and yet she's alert and conscious of everything going on around her . . . The lady with the snowy hair and the anthracite face, bears no description for she is God.<sup>13</sup>

### Women as actors

But it is not only Jan Carew's ancestral line in which he finds remarkable women. He takes great pains to ensure that other women, whose roles were no less important in other contexts, are brought into focus. One such campaign is seen in his quest to provide perspective to the shaping of so-called 'great' men. Carew often asks, 'why we do not know about the mothers of these figures in history? Or did they simply fall on to the earth from the sky?' By leaving these figures 'motherless', later generations are left without certain key contexts through which to understand them. Thus, in recasting the scenes from the past, Carew frequently seeks out opportunities to look at the relationships between these men and the women in their lives, so as to provide fresh perspectives. In his memoirs, *Ghosts in Our Blood: with Malcolm X in Africa, England, and the Caribbean*, Carew writes that people must recognise the importance of the 'ghosts in [their] blood' and the importance of acting on their behalf. He was particularly interested in the role played by Malcolm X's mother, who has been largely ignored, if not vilified, in traditional biographies.



The biographers of Malcolm X . . . have never portrayed [his] Grenadian mother, Louise Langdon Norton Little, as the remarkable woman that she was . . . she disappears from the pages of history . . . When Louise Little is mentioned . . . her life story is more notable for its omissions than for what is actually told about her . . . In his quiet avuncular fashion, Wilfred [Malcolm X's brother] began telling an entirely different story . . . 'Every day when we came home from school, my mother would sit us down and have us read aloud passages from Marryshow's paper *The West Indian* . . . He and Garvey were her two idols.'<sup>14</sup>

By bringing Louise Langdon Norton Little to life, Carew demonstrates how mothers influenced the paths that their sons would eventually follow. Certainly, young Malcolm had to have been impressed by his mother's steadfast commitment and support for the nascent independence movements represented by Marryshow's and Garvey's activism.

Another quest has been to explore the full ramifications of the contacts between the Europeans and indigenous peoples of the Americas and Africa in the Columbian era. This theme appears in various works, including Carew's assessment of the Moorish contributions to European development, his essays on Columbus, and his history of Grenada. He contends that the correction of the historical record cannot rely on a retelling of the deeds of men without an analysis of the vital roles played by women. Regrettably, however, their stories are frequently left out or remain imbedded in remote and obscure records, but Carew makes a point of searching these out and inserting them into his work. He thus brings new perspectives to historical enquiry and often rekindles interest where there was little before.

In 1985, Jan Carew published a history of the Caribbean island of Grenada, entitled, *Grenada: the hour will strike again*. Among many historical figures, he brought the former slave and market woman Gamay back to life, pointing to her pivotal role in furthering the local revolutionary impulses:

Gamay, the Free Black marketwoman, not only presided over the central stall in the St George's market, she, from time to time, visited other markets, and after a while became the most widely known and the most prosperous of the island's vendors and traders. She had been a slave on the Belvedere Estate and, publicly, did not have a good word to say about the Fedon family who owned it . . . Gamay was an indispensable link in Fedon's revolutionary chain of command. Born in Benin and brought to Martinique when she was eight, she was separated from her parents and brought to Grenada two years later . . . From the markets, she controlled a network of agents in every major estate, in the fields, in the big houses, in the maroon hideouts and even inside the Governor's mansion.<sup>15</sup>

In another example, in his contribution to Ivan Van Sertima's *Golden Age of the Moor*, 'Moorish culture-bringers: bearers of enlightenment', he tellingly inserted a quote attributed to the mother of the last Moorish ruler, Abu' Abdi-Llah. This passage, although brief, not only enlightened us as to the relationship between mother and son, but also – perhaps more importantly – indicated that which was lost. The capitulation represented not only a loss of property, but also a loss of national pride.

The young Caliph, Abu' Abdi-Llah ('Boabdil' to the Spaniards), handed over the keys to the Spanish sovereigns and so the *Reconquista* came to a dramatic end . . . Boabdil had surrendered this last Moorish outpost without a fight and his dark-skinned mother, 'A'isha, had reproached him bitterly, saying, 'Weep like a woman for what you could not defend like a man.'<sup>16</sup>

Less is specifically known about the women who were among the African peoples who escaped into the interior of Surinam in the early years of slavery, but extracting information from oral accounts of their descendants, Carew again finds ways to provide insights into their contributions to Maroon survival:

When the maroon women in Surinam were escaping from Dutch plantations to sanctuaries in the hinterland, they stored grains of rice and seeds in their thick African hair. Their woolly hair became a garner for seeds of life and culture, and when they arrived at their destination of freedom, they shook their heads and consecrated the new land with food crops for their survival.<sup>17</sup>

As a playwright for both radio and television in England and Canada, Jan Carew had a number of opportunities to bring some of the most gripping conflicts to life through the actions of women in his works. One play, set in Guyana and based upon a true story, looked at the love/hate relationship between a recently escaped convict and his former love. This play, first performed on radio, under the title of *The University of Hunger*, and later on television as *The Big Pride*, offered up Dolly, a woman whose observations exposed for all to see the less-than-secure core of the hero's resolve.

The play tells the story of a convict (Sutleg or Sut) and his assistant (Smallboy) who escape from prison and try to 'hide out' in plain sight by posing as rich businessmen staying in a hotel. Sutleg has recently discovered that Dolly has had his child while he was in prison and he has summoned her to meet him:

The door leading to the corridor opens and Dolly Greene enters. Dolly Greene is twenty-five years of age. She is not ordinary and like Sut [the play's hero] she is outside class and definition . . .



*Sut*: How old is he?

*Dolly*: Eleven years and twenty-one days . . . I look at you sitting there posturing the tough guy, wearing expensive clothes, smoking expensive cigarettes and I find it hard to connect you with the man I once knew. Until I look in your eyes and see them asking the same question they were asking when you had just come back from Jamaica with only a pair of jeans and a sports shirt on your back to call your own. And you know what is the question your eyes keep asking? (*Pause*) Where else? Where else can I run to now? . . .

*Sut*: You haven't changed either. You could always explain away everything. Could always find an excuse . . .

*Dolly*: . . . after you left, how I cried *Sut*, how I cried. That time when I cried for my father's death in spite of myself, that was nothing to how I was crying now . . . And when at last I got up the courage to walk outside, to try to come after you . . . Instead I told myself that I was going to have this child, so that after it was born I could take it to you, fling it on your doorstep and trap you with it, just as it was trapping me . . . All your life *Sut*, you been fighting a lion, like the Masai warrior who looks like you. Only his lion is a real lion, for he is a real Masai. And yours is the white man. That Masai really kills that lion with his spear. You stand off where you can't see the lion for what he is and make gestures with your spear. And you make sure never to come close enough to see that he isn't any more a lion than you are a Masai warrior . . .<sup>18</sup>

Jan Carew wrote another play which he set in Washington, DC, during the Civil War. Entitled *Black Horse, Pale Rider*, the work was commissioned by the director of the Toronto Workshop Productions Theatre for its opening in the mid-1960s. This play was so successful that it was also selected as Canada's entry for the Venice Theatre Festival and a production was mounted in Yugoslavia in that same period. In a major difference from the tradition of Civil War and Reconstruction-era stories in which men are the movers and shakers, Carew has purposefully placed women at strategic points. One of these is Bess, a former slave who was Thadeus Stevens's mistress and soulmate. Stevens, a steadfast anti-slavery activist, was a successful Pennsylvania lawyer who served several years in the House of Representatives and under Abraham Lincoln, as chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee. By putting some of the most telling words into Bess's mouth, Carew could demonstrate that she not only shared Stevens's bed, but was also the one who spurred on his conviction that the emancipation of the slaves was the only way forward for blacks and whites alike.



*Bess:* Don't say it, just get up.

*Stevens:* (*sitting up slowly*) Wish the black people would fight their own fight.

*Bess:* They ain't in the Senate, and if they was, the kind of Negro you'd get there wouldn't fight. But you're white, and your woman's a black woman, so you're fighting for her and through her for all black folks . . .

*Stevens:* Sometimes I begin to despair . . . Wish I had your faith Bess. You believe that goodness can change the hearts of men, but I know what unites men, hate and malice and greed and fear . . .

*Bess:* That ain't true, Thad Stevens.

*Stevens:* Will the black people hear . . . I mean listen to this plan?

*Bess:* They'll hear 'cause the white folks will scream and shout that it's wrong . . . and the harder they shout the more black folks will listen and hear and think . . .

*Stevens:* In a way, I know you're right, Bess, but a hundred years an awfully long time to wait . . . we'll all be dead.

*Bess:* My mamma done told me that a man's only dead when all who remembered him pass away, and some folks get remembered a long long time . . . But we got our business to do today. Let other folks worry about a hundred years from now . . . Better get some breakfast under your belt or the great man's gonna sound like a hollow log of bone . . . The South's gonna come back full of hate, and what's gonna check that hate? The plan. For it's not so much a plan as a trumpet-call to those who live in fear and terror to come out and fight. And this plan's not gonna fail, no! It will purify the heads and hearts of some, and open the eyes of black folks a little, clean the scales out of their eyes, so we can all see ourselves more clearly, and seeing ourselves we can then see the white man like we never saw him before . . . Yes, that's how it's gonna go . . . We see ourselves by ourselves, and then we look out and see the whole world.<sup>19</sup>

### Alternatives for young minds

Carew's fictional work also frequently centres around strong women or girls. They appear in his plays, children's stories and novellas for young adults as alternatives to the traditional representations of women. One such character is Omalara, the Queen of the Riverfolk, who rules the land under the water. When she captures Rhodius, the fearless captain of the Fire Plume, she states:

‘The silence here will be a balm to your troubled soul, my brother, and the seascapes are more varied and more beautiful than anything the Sun-World has to offer . . . I used to watch you sailing by time and again, to hear you bellowing orders to your men; you were so certain of your right to tear apart the roof of the water over us . . . what gave you the right to do all this?’ . . .

‘But I didn’t know, Queen,’ Rhodius pleaded.

‘You people in the Sun-World are so insensitive,’ the Queen said resignedly, and then seeing how dejected Rhodius looked, she burst out laughing.

‘Why are you always laughing at me, Queen; no woman has ever treated me this way before!’

‘As long as you men take yourselves so seriously, we’ll laugh at you,’ the Queen said, challenging Rhodius with her eyes until he lowered his.<sup>20</sup>

Drawing from the stories and traditions of his native Guyana, Jan Carew sees in these traditions role models that can be resurrected for today’s youth. In an interview with Maureen Warner-Lewis in Prague in the 1980s, he stated, ‘there is a dearth of material for our children which would give them images of themselves. When I say “our children”, it is the Black children everywhere who need this. And I’m interested in giving to children’s stories a kind of ideological underpinning.’<sup>21</sup> The story ‘The Greatest Gift of All’ is a prime example. Carew presents the character of Lara as the one who would ultimately find the best of all gifts for the Juba people:

‘Let me open my heart to you because Mantop [death] will be coming for me before the sun goes down. So listen well to what I have to say. My face has beaten against many years, and now I’m ready to meet my maker. This is how you must choose a leader from amongst you to succeed me. All of the young men and women alike, must make their way up Nameless Mountain, and the one that climbs the highest and brings back a gift from the Sky God, that one you must anoint as your leader’ . . .

And after a month and a day of mourning, the young people set out up Nameless Mountain for the third time. Amongst them was a tall, lissom young woman named Lara. She was strong-willed, independent and could run as if she had deer feet . . . her mother would say . . . ‘Lara, what’s going to become of you girl! You’re gnawing at the bones of everybody’s griefs again. Why don’t you get married and settled down? . . . What do you want from life, girl?’

‘I want to change the world, Mama,’ Lara would reply . . .<sup>22</sup>

In another novella written for young adults, 'The Sisters', Jan Carew sets out to 'to bring back a kind of African aesthetic about age and beauty to counter the Western idea that all beauty must be young, have a toothpaste smile, high bosom, long legs, blonde hair. When you get older they fade you out. Whereas in Africa the tradition was for the aged to acquire more status and respect.'<sup>23</sup>

In the final result, Jan Carew's feminism is manifested by a conscious effort to embrace the full complexity of the human condition. For him, a picture that does not include both men and women, showing the depth and variety of their respective roles and contributions, does not depict reality. In his view, the images imbibed from the various media not only shape the perceptions that a given society holds about its members but also form the images which these persons hold of themselves. Jan Carew purposefully sets out to provide alternatives, humanising that which had been dehumanised. Empowerment begins with the deconstruction of the old and reconstruction of the new. As bell hooks puts it:

[we] must be willing to grant the effort to critically intervene and transform the world of image making authority of place in our political movements of liberation and self-determination (be they anti-imperialist, feminist, gay rights, black liberation, or all of the above and more) . . . We would consider crucial both the kind of images we produce and the way we critically write and talk about images. And most important, we would rise to the challenge to speak that which has not been spoken.<sup>24</sup>

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## From Columbus to Hitler and back again

*It was a fearful sight to see them thus frying in the fire and the streams of blood quenching the same, and horrible was the stink and scent thereof; but the victory seemed a sweet sacrifice and they gave praise thereof to God; who had wrought so wonderfully for them, thus to enclose their enemies in their hands and give them so speedy a victory over so proud and insulting an enemy.<sup>1</sup>*

So wrote Governor William Bradford of Plymouth Colony, in what later became the state of Massachusetts. Bradford was justifying the burning alive by Pilgrims of hundreds of Pequot men, women and children on 25 May 1637. Soldiers shot hundreds more when they tried to flee. Native Americans had helped the Pilgrims survive their first hard winters in the New World, less than two decades before, but now the Pilgrims wanted their land.

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The mass murder of people by western nations is neither new nor unique, though many historians like to pretend that it is. The only

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holocaust they seem able to recognise was the one committed by Hitler and the Nazis in Europe during the second world war, but mass murder by the West began with the rediscovery of the Americas and the modern colonialism that followed. Exposing the truth about the role of race in shaping western history is something Jan Carew has done both powerfully and eloquently throughout his career. His writings have revealed the racial mythology that has been created under the guise of writing history: a mythology that was then used to justify the theft of the land and lives of people of colour. Carew's work is being analysed by others in this issue, but I would like here to use his writings as an inspiration to explore further a subject that has been so important to him: genocide.

In his essay, 'Columbus and the origins of racism in the Americas', first published in *Race & Class* in 1988, Jan Carew traced the roots of genocide back to Columbus and the colonialism that was spawned by the European invasion of the Americas. Whereas Carew turned to Columbus and the Caribbean in his challenge to racial mythology, I would like to examine the racial mythology of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century US, and the implications that that mythology has had for the world. When Hitler and his Nazis began working out the race-based policies that they would pursue to war and genocide, they already had many western examples to choose from. Belgium under King Leopold II had exterminated millions of Africans in the Congo, stolen their land, and used the survivors as slave labourers. While Belgium was practising extermination in the Congo, other western nations were murdering people of colour who stood in the way of their greed for land, money and power. But when Hitler and his Nazis sought guidance and justification for the race-based Third Reich they were building, they turned especially to the racial practices and policies of the United States. And they found what they looked for.

As Jan Carew pointed out in his essay on Columbus, this modern colonialism 'de-civilized vast areas of the world'.

It began with the holocaust against Native Americans, twelve million of whom died in the first forty years of the Columbian era, continued against Africans, two hundred million of whom were estimated to have died in the Atlantic Slave Trade, and then there were countless deaths of Asian peoples as colonialism gained momentum.<sup>2</sup>

Yet a vast curtain of silence has been drawn across those holocausts, as if they never happened. And even the telling of Hitler's holocaust has been shaped into a narrative that has no room in it for the fact that the belief in superior and inferior races runs powerfully throughout the last several hundred years of western history, justifying the subjugation or extermination of those deemed 'inferior'. The extermination of



the ‘savages’ by the Pilgrims, wrote one American historian in words that sounded eerily like the later statements of Adolf Hitler, was justified because ‘it is only in that way that the higher races have been able to preserve themselves and carry on their progressive work’.<sup>3</sup>

### *The Philippines*

In 1901, an American general leading his forces against Filipino freedom fighters during the Spanish-American war, ordered his troops to turn the land into ‘a howling wilderness’. General Jacob Smith told his commanders, ‘I want no prisoners. I wish you to kill and burn; the more you burn and kill the better it will please me.’<sup>4</sup> By the time the war was over, American soldiers had killed over 20,000 Filipinos, while an estimated 200,000 more died from the epidemics that ravaged the islands as a result of the war.

President Theodore Roosevelt, who had earlier described African Americans as ‘but a few generations removed from the wildest savagery’, also expressed nothing but contempt for the Filipinos.<sup>5</sup> Defending the United States government’s betrayal of the Filipino independence struggle and that government’s seizure, instead, of the islands for the benefit of American businessmen, Roosevelt declared that granting the Filipinos their freedom ‘would be like granting self-government to an Apache reservation’.<sup>6</sup> Roosevelt’s rationale was echoed on the floor of the US Congress. Claiming that God had been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic people for a thousand years so that they could rule others, senator Albert J. Beveridge declared Americans ‘are a conquering race . . . we must obey our blood and occupy new markets, and, if necessary, new lands’.<sup>7</sup>

### *Southwest Africa and the Congo*

In 1904 in Southwest Africa, then under German colonial rule, the German general Lothar von Trotha issued an ‘Extermination Order’ for the Herero people. Men were to be shot on sight, and women and children were to be shot or driven from the land. The orders sounded almost exactly like those given time after time in the United States when whites stole the land of Native Americans, and like those issued by American commanders in the Philippines. After being attacked on three sides, the 80,000 Herero retreated in the only direction left open to them – the Kalahari Desert, where all but a few thousand died. ‘The month-long sealing of desert areas, carried out with iron severity, completed the work of annihilation’, read the German General Staff’s account of the extermination campaign. ‘The death rattles of the dying and their insane screams of fury . . . resounded in the sublime silence of infinity.’<sup>8</sup> The entire fatherland, the General Staff reported from Berlin, owed its gratitude to the

German army for this result. Those Hereros who survived were sentenced to hard labour in concentration camps.

While all of this was going on, King Leopold of Belgium was running a vast, incredibly brutal, slave empire in what he called the Congo Free State. In 1884, the United States became the first nation officially to recognise the Belgian claim to 900,000 square miles of central Africa. By the time Belgian rule ended, an estimated 10 million men, women and children (out of a population believed to be anywhere from 20 to 40 million) had been exterminated.<sup>9</sup> American investors in the Congo and its profitable barbarity included the Guggenheim family and John D. Rockefeller, who declared that business success was 'merely the working out of a law of nature and a law of God'.<sup>10</sup>

### The US and eugenics

'No false philanthropy or racial theory can convince sensible people that the preservation of a tribe of South Africa's kaffirs . . . is more important to the future of mankind than the spread of the great European nations and the white race in general', wrote Paul Rohrbach in *German Thought in the World* (1912). 'Not until the native learns to produce anything of value in the service of the higher race . . . does he gain any moral right to exist.'<sup>11</sup>

Rohrbach's book was not only a bestseller in Germany, his racial beliefs were also widely shared in the United States. Almost 5,000 African American men, women and children were lynched in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: hanged from trees, soaked with gasoline and burned alive, castrated and slowly carved with knives while mobs of white men, women and children cheered and then took pieces of the bodies as souvenirs. Many of the lynchings were advertised beforehand in newspapers and assisted by the police, yet not a single American president supported legislation to make lynching a federal crime. The belief in white supremacy was reflected in the laws of every state in the south, and several in the north and west.

In the same year that Rohrbach's book was published, the first International Congress for Eugenics was held in London. The word 'eugenics' had been coined by the English scientist, Sir Francis Galton, in 1883. He defined it as the 'science of improving the stock', and said the eugenics movement should strive to give 'the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable'.<sup>12</sup> The 'science' of eugenics helped to institutionalise scientific racism, which misinterpreted and twisted legitimate scientific discoveries and methods to create the myth that human beings were divided into two separate groups: the healthy and intelligent (invariably white, though Jews, Southern and Eastern Europeans and a few other whites failed to qualify), and the sick and unintelligent (some whites



and all people of colour). With the advent of scientific racism, which remains a strong force today, albeit in covert form, crimes and social control policies against entire groups could be justified on a 'scientific' basis.<sup>13</sup>

The first International Congress for Eugenics was held in London in 1912. One of the American participants was Charles B. Davenport, holder of a PhD in zoology from Harvard University and director of the Eugenics Record Office in Cold Spring Harbor, New York. Davenport's work at the Eugenics Office was funded by the prestigious Carnegie Institution of Washington, which supported many scientific research projects in the United States. Davenport, like all of Galton's followers, believed that unalterable genetic traits were passed from generation to generation, resulting in races that were inherently superior or inferior. These beliefs, which he set forth in his popular *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics* (1911), were used to indoctrinate millions of American students in elementary and high schools, as well as in the country's most prestigious universities.

By 1914, courses devoted in whole or large part to eugenics were being taught to the country's future political, business and academic leaders at Harvard, Brown, Columbia, Northwestern, Clark, Wisconsin and Cornell universities. Millions of ordinary Americans were taught the mythology of scientific racism from articles in newspapers and magazines throughout the United States. 'Danger that world scum will demoralize America', read a headline in a Boston newspaper about so-called non-Nordic immigration. 'If we don't do something about immigration we shall have a mongrelized America.'<sup>14</sup>

One of those who shared the fear of a 'mongrelized' America was Woodrow Wilson. During his first presidential campaign in 1912, he declared: 'In the matter of Chinese and Japanese coolie immigration, I stand for the national policy of exclusion . . . We cannot make a homogeneous population of a people who do not blend with the Caucasian race.'<sup>15</sup> Another major figure concerned about the possibility of a mixed-race America was its twenty-sixth president, Theodore Roosevelt, who wished that the 'wrong people could be prevented entirely from breeding'.<sup>16</sup> 'Some day', Roosevelt wrote to Davenport, 'we will realize that the prime duty of the good citizen of the right type is to leave his or her blood behind him in the world, and that we have no business permitting the perpetuation of citizens of the wrong type.'<sup>17</sup>

The 1912 Congress for Eugenics had marked a significant step towards German and American cooperation in exploring ways to mould the racial makeup of their societies. The Germans were especially interested in American laws on forced sterilisation and racial segregation. The idea of banning mixed racial marriages and sexual intercourse between the races had originated in the United



States, which passed the world's first anti-miscegenation statute in Maryland in 1661. By the beginning of the first world war, twenty-nine states had statutes making miscegenation an offence punishable by imprisonment for periods ranging from thirty days in Delaware to ten years in Florida, Mississippi and North Carolina. Scientific racism was used to justify the statutes. Lawmakers argued that interracial marriage would lead to 'deplorable results' and 'mongrel breeds', and courts routinely accepted this argument.<sup>18</sup>

Although the anti-miscegenation statutes were allegedly based on science, the various states differed widely on the definition of a 'Negro' (ranging from 'any person of one-eighth or more Negro blood', to anyone whose black ancestry could be traced back three generations, to those people with any ascertainable 'Negro blood' at all).<sup>19</sup> The states also differed widely on which races were prohibited from marrying whites, with some states including Mongolians, Chinese, Japanese, Malayans, American Indians, Asiatic Indians, mulattoes, Ethiopians, Hindus, Koreans, Mestizos and so-called half-breeds.

German eugenicists and political leaders praised the United States for its attempts to protect the so-called purity of whites by these laws against mixed marriages, and followed its example in Nazi Germany's Nuremberg laws of 1935. The 'Law for the protection of German blood and German honour' made it an offence punishable by penal servitude for Jews to marry 'citizens of German or some related blood'.<sup>20</sup> The law then went on to define a Jew as anyone who was descended from 'at least three racially full Jewish grandparents'. The law also provided for other definitions of Jews, just as the laws of the various states of the US had provided for other definitions of Negro. Under the Nuremberg laws, Jews were also defined in degrees of '*Mischlinge*' (Germans of mixed race): *Mischlinge* of the first degree had two Jewish grandparents, while *Mischlinge* of the second degree had one Jewish grandparent.

### **Forcible sterilisation**

German eugenicists and political leaders also turned to the United States for guidance on legislation for forcible sterilisation. According to Otto Wagener, head of the Nazi Party's Economic Policy Office from 1931 to 1933, Adolf Hitler once told him:

Now that we know the laws of heredity, it is possible to a large extent to prevent unhealthy and severely handicapped beings from coming into the world. I have studied with great interest the laws of several American states concerning prevention of reproduction by people whose progeny would, in all probability, be of no value or be injurious to the racial stock.<sup>21</sup>

Between 1907 and 1931, American eugenicists helped persuade thirty state legislatures to pass forced sterilisation laws aimed at keeping the so-called unfit from reproducing. This legislation was upheld by the US Supreme Court in 1916 and again in 1927. 'It is better for all the world if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crimes, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind', wrote Associate Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes in 1927. He was defending the state of Virginia's right to forcibly sterilise 'a feeble-minded white woman who was committed to the State Colony'.<sup>22</sup> The person most responsible for convincing the Supreme Court of the value of compulsory surgical sterilisation was Dr Harry Hamilton Laughlin, a Princeton University graduate who developed 'A model eugenic sterilization law' in 1922. This called for the sterilisation of people who could not support themselves economically, had low IQs, or were blind, mentally retarded, criminally insane, physically deformed, diseased or deaf.

Most people forcibly sterilised in the United States were poor whites, who were sterilised so they could not mingle their genes with those of wealthier, supposedly more intelligent, whites. But for African Americans, violence and racial segregation were used so extensively to keep them in their place that the question of sterilisation did not really arise. Not until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s had largely ended those means of control and succeeded in striking down segregation laws, did more states in the American south begin to forcibly sterilise African Americans. (From 1949 to 1960, South Carolina's state mental hospital performed 104 surgical sterilisations. All but two of these were performed on African Americans, all of whom were women. In the 1970s, it was discovered that illegal, federally-financed forced sterilisations were being performed on African Americans in Alabama and North and South Carolina.<sup>23</sup>)

Germany had made the connection between sterilisation and race even earlier, as the result of the birth of hundreds of mixed-race children in the Rhineland after the first world war. The mothers of these children were German and their fathers were Africans who were part of the French occupation army from 1919 to 1929. British Prime Minister David Lloyd George and US President Woodrow Wilson had protested to the French about the use of the African troops, and the German delegation to Versailles was informed that 'colored troops should not be made a part of the army of occupation'.<sup>24</sup> The French insisted, however, and the troops quickly became the object of false charges of rape and brutality. Fifty thousand Swedish women signed a statement denouncing the black troops, as did women from Norway, Italy, France and the United States. Mass protest meetings were held in the United States, the soldiers were denounced on the floor of the US Congress, and pamphlets denouncing the 'black



horror' were widely distributed in the United States and England. Bishop Eugenio Pacelli, the Vatican's representative to Bavaria at the time, told his superiors that the black troops were routinely raping German women and children (Pacelli would later become Pope Pius XII and request that no black Allied soldiers be allowed to occupy Rome towards the end of the second world war).

In 1933, the year Hitler and the Nazis took power, they passed a 'Law on preventing hereditarily ill progeny'. They were able to pass this legislation so quickly because they took its basic guidelines from Harry Laughlin's model eugenic sterilization law of 1922. 'The new [German] law is clean-cut, direct and "model"', commented an editorial in *Eugenical News*, the official organ of Charles Davenport's Eugenics Research Association. 'Its standards are social and genetical. Its application is entrusted to specialized courts and procedure. From a legal point of view nothing more could be desired.'<sup>25</sup>

Some of the Nazis' first sterilisation targets were the Rhineland mixed-race children, derogatorily called 'Rhineland bastards'. The same year that the law was passed, Goering – head of the Prussian state police, founder of the Gestapo and creator of the Nazis' first concentration camps – asked the authorities to take whatever steps were needed to keep the Rhineland children from reproducing. In 1937, acting under secret orders, the Gestapo seized and confined hundreds of these young people. Dr Eugen Fischer, head of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Eugenics and Human Heredity in Berlin, was one of the doctors who then performed surgical sterilisations and medical experiments on the children. Most of them later disappeared. Fischer, who was invited by Davenport to succeed him as president of the International Federation of Eugenic Organisations but declined, conducted the first course for SS doctors at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute from October 1934 to August 1935.

One of the primary supporters of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute was the Rockefeller Foundation, which kept it afloat during the Depression and, at Fischer's request, continued to support it even after the Nazis came to power. At a round-table discussion organised by the American Eugenics Society in 1937 at the New York Academy of Medicine, Charles R. Stockard, president of the board of the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research, stated that the human race faced 'ultimate extermination' unless the procreation of 'low grade and defective stocks' could be 'absolutely prevented'.<sup>26</sup> Eugenicists from the United States continued to visit Nazi Germany, even after the outbreak of the second world war.

One such was Lothrop Stoddard, one of the most admired of American eugenicists and racial anthropologists, both in Germany and the United States. Stoddard was the author of two books that were best-sellers in the United States and that had won him renown



among believers in white supremacy throughout the world: *The Rising Tide of Color Against White-World Supremacy* and *The Revolt Against Civilization*. Stoddard's admirers in the United States included the future president, Calvin Coolidge. 'If the white immigrant can gravely disorder the national life', Stoddard wrote in *The Rising Tide*, 'it is not too much to say that the colored immigrant would doom it to certain death.'<sup>27</sup> As vice-president-elect, Coolidge echoed those feelings in 1921, writing in the mass circulation magazine, *Good Housekeeping*: 'Biological laws tell us that certain divergent people will not mix or blend. The Nordics propagate themselves successfully. With other races, the outcome shows deterioration on both sides.'<sup>28</sup> Stoddard's writings on racial subjects were later featured in Nazi school textbooks, and he was received personally by Hitler, Heinrich Himmler, head of the Gestapo and SS, and Joachim von Ribbentrop, minister of foreign affairs for the Nazis.

Another man whose racial views were extremely popular among both white Americans and the Nazis was Madison Grant. Holder of a law degree from Columbia University and a trustee of the American Museum of Natural History, Grant numbered Theodore Roosevelt among his friends and exchanged many letters with him – including one in which he stated that the skull size of Jews determined their racial characteristics. Grant's best-selling *The Passing of the Great Race* first came out in 1916 but continued to be reprinted into the 1930s, and contained passages similar to those in Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. 'To admit the unchangeable differentiation of race in its modern scientific meaning', Grant wrote, 'is to admit inevitably the existence of superiority in one race and of inferiority in another'.<sup>29</sup> In 1934, Hitler reportedly told Leon F. Whitney, secretary of the American Eugenics Society and an admirer of the Nazi sterilisation programme, that *The Passing of the Great Race* 'was his Bible'.<sup>30</sup> 'No one has as much reason to note the work of this man with the keenest of attention', wrote Eugen Fischer in his foreword to the 1937 German translation of *The Passing of the Great Race*, 'as does a German of today – in a time when the racial idea has become one of the chief foundations of the National Socialist State's population policies'.<sup>31</sup>

Ironically, when Hitler embarked on his campaign of mass murder of Jews, Poles, Russians, Roma and others deemed inferior, few of them could escape to the United States because of harsh racial restrictions in the Immigration Act of 1924. Leading American eugenicists and their followers had helped design the Act and, when President Coolidge signed it, he declared, 'American must be kept American'.<sup>32</sup> And so, those people Hitler and the Nazis later deemed unfit to live, were first deemed unfit to live in the United States.

\* \* \*

The silence of history has closed over the graves of most victims of mass murder, especially if they were people of colour. But each holocaust was unique to the people who were its victims, each death unique to the person dying. The silence of history has also closed over the role of leaders in the United States who, with their anti-black laws and practices, helped to provide the pattern the Nazis used to build a race-based nation.

In *Fulcrums of Change*, Jan Carew wrote that, after the coming of European adventurers, Carib and Arawak Indians 'gradually disappear, in a blind wild forest of blood'.<sup>33</sup> In the 1980s, forces trained and equipped by the US committed over 600 massacres in Mayan villages in Guatemala. They raped, tortured, murdered and buried their victims in mass graves. An estimated 100,000 Mayan men, women and children were exterminated, and an estimated 400 villages destroyed. According to the February 1999 report of the Historical Clarification Commission, an independent Guatemalan truth commission, the US government was complicit in the 'aggressive, racist and extremely cruel nature of violations that resulted in the massive extermination of defenceless Mayan communities'.<sup>34</sup>

Jan Carew's 'blind wild forest of blood' has been revisited again and again since Columbus, and the seeds for more forests are still with us. Carew adjures us not to be complacent. Instead, he serves as an example of the need for writers – especially writers of colour – to speak the truth about racism to people who prefer to believe the mythology, and to expose those historians who create and perpetuate the mythology. By re-examining the racial mythology that underpins much of western belief and practice, we bring to light the deep ties between this early form of racism and other forms of racism that appeared later – such as the ties between American racism and Nazism. It is in this context that I present this research as an example of the kind of history-telling about which Jan Carew has always been so passionate.

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# Reflections

## *Black Midas: anticipating independence*

*By Roy Heath*

Jan Carew's first novel, *Black Midas*, had a powerful effect on Guyanese intellectuals. Published in the fifties, a decade before Guyana gained independence from Britain, it is the sort of book one associates with the release of energy generated by independence itself. In other words, *Black Midas*, anticipating a collective emotional state, was able to draw inspiration from Guyanese myth and myth-making, rather than seeking to copy the themes and preoccupations of our political masters. On the face of it, such a development appears to be a matter of choice for the individual artist; but nothing can be further from the truth. The creative numbness that affects the colonial was rendered more severe in the case of Guyanese, whose West African traditions had been all but wiped out in the aftermath of the Middle Passage. Furthermore, these traditions were replaced by enduring images and stories invented to feed the psyche of our colonial masters. Millais' Ophelia drowning in a stream, the young Raleigh mesmerised by a seaman's tales, Jane Austen's preoccupation with matrimony. . .

It is in this climate of illusion that Jan Carew's *Black Midas* came out. It dealt with the legendary gold and diamond seekers, some of whom made fortunes in Guyana's interior and came back to Georgetown, the capital, to consolidate their wealth or, more often, to waste it on riotous living. The merit of the tale is as much in the choice of subject as in its pithy elaboration. Guyanese are familiar with accounts of porkknockers (diamond seekers) who, having made a strike, are unable to get past the whores of Kurupung. In the experiences of these porkknockers, a whole psychological landscape is opened up, suggesting

problems of envy, loyalty, solitude, greed and the masculine need for adventure and physical challenges. *Black Midas* was not only the pronouncement that we Guyanese had at last discovered our soul; it broached a subject of endless fascination. Why, for instance, were most of the successful treasure hunters incapable of exploiting their wealth wisely? Is it that the jungle and solitude proved to be greater attractions than the settled life? Could it be that Journey and Seeking are, for some at least, irresistible archetypes? There are, after all, innumerable stories of men who went back and back again to the forest only to perish there, leaving behind perplexed, despairing families.

So much for Jan Carew's contribution to Guyanese fiction. Equally striking, however, is his willingness to engage his abilities in the analysis of art and the sources of art. A case in point is his paper on the paintings of Aubrey Williams, the late Guyanese artist. Williams, who emigrated to England in the early fifties, found himself confronted with the dilemma of all expatriate painters. If the novelist can rely on memory and the energy of nostalgia to feed his or her imagination, the painter needs the immediate image on which to feast the eye. Marc Chagall, the Russian artist, saw his work decline in power after his move to Paris, and his retreat into the fantasy of levitating lovers was the price he paid for the absence of native images. Aubrey Williams, faced with the same dilemma, fell in with the 'abstract' movement and managed to produce some fine work. The fact that Jan Carew should see fit to take this dilemma seriously is testimony to his vision and independence of thought, for very little has been written about the problem, except from a socio-political perspective. A startling lack indeed! Emigration is a fact of life, not only for the manifest emigré, but for a range of exiles, who are obliged to adjust in manifold ways to new and often hostile conditions. The infant is an exile from the womb, as the detained criminal is an exile from relative freedom. Endless examples can be adduced to exemplify an experience from which none of us can escape.

Guyana's other pioneer novelist, Edgar Mittelholzer, also came from New Amsterdam. This coincidence would hardly be worth mentioning, but for the fact that so many other outstanding Guyanese were originally from this township. It seems to be that there is a mysterious connection between provincial origins and artistic dynamism, an observation borne out by, say, the experience in England. Were not the Brontës, Jane Austen, Shakespeare, Hardy all born outside London? It would be interesting to hear Jan Carew's views on the same subject.

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# Jan Carew – the Chicago years

*By Nancy Singham*

I first met Jan Carew in Jamaica, where I lived and worked throughout the 1960s with my then husband Archie Singham, who taught at the University of the West Indies, and our two children. The occasion was a glittering government cocktail party, some time in the late 1960s, of a type much in vogue in recently independent Jamaica. I still have this clear picture in my mind's eye of a tall, distinguished man who seemed to have been to every place in the world, and who knew so many of the leaders of the independence movements in the Third World. Of course I knew who he was, as his reputation had preceded him. He was a well-known and much respected figure among the intellectuals and political activists at the university and the political leadership of the English-speaking Caribbean who had garnered the first fruits of independence.

By the time I met Jan, the first flush of enthusiasm at achieving independence earlier in the decade had begun to wane. In Jan's native Guyana, Forbes Burnham had wrested total political control from the freely elected government of Cheddi Jagan in an electoral and constitutional coup, engineered with the help of the CIA and the British Colonial Office in flagrant disregard of any semblance of democracy. In Jamaica, the Black Power riots of 1968 were sparked by the government's refusal to let the Guyanese scholar and political activist Walter Rodney into Jamaica to take up a post in the history department of the university. The Jamaican military and police surrounded the gates of the university to prevent the students from marching into the city, and students remained at the barricades for days in a very tense atmosphere. On the economic front, as a small farmer in Jamaica remarked, 'Now that independence come and gone', life had got worse for him and his compatriots, not better. Jan's critique of the political leadership in much of the English-speaking Caribbean of this period was trenchant and scathing.



I doubt that Jan has any recollection of that meeting, but he made a big impression on me. Little did I know I would be working closely with him in the 1980s in an entirely different political context, but that our continuing mutual interest in the Caribbean would create an undergirding for our later political and personal acquaintance.

*The Dennis Brutus Defense Committee*

I didn't see or meet Jan again till 1980. In 1970, I had left Jamaica, spending the next ten years in Ann Arbor and Detroit, where I was intensely involved in radical politics. In Detroit, I became active in the political movements that came out of the ferment that gave rise to organisations like the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and the Motor City Labor League. In 1980, I moved to Chicago to take over as publisher of a small radical press, Vanguard Books. Lee Ballinger, author of a book we were publishing about racism in sports in the US, suggested that I contact Professor Dennis Brutus at Northwestern University for a possible blurb recommending Lee's book. Dennis's successful organising of the boycott of South Africa in the 1964 Olympics had caught Lee's attention. Dennis gladly complied, even though he had no idea who I was. Shortly after that, I was contacted by a close friend, Richard Bray, who was calling a public meeting at Guild Books, the progressive bookstore he had just launched with a group of friends, to protest the outrageous attempt by the US government to deport Dennis to South Africa. The government was using a visa technicality in what was clearly a well-orchestrated political move.

At that meeting, I met Jan Carew for the first time since leaving the West Indies. Jan and Dennis were not only colleagues at Northwestern University at that time, but also close friends and political allies. And, for the first time, I met Jan's wife, Joy. The Carews and I immediately signed up for the Dennis Brutus Defense Committee which was being formed. Little did any of us guess that this cause would yoke us together in struggle for the next three years. Jan and I became co-conveners of the committee, with Joy serving in different capacities during this period. Shantoba was born during these years, and attended all the meetings of the committee as our youngest member! We became not only comrades-in-arms but close personal friends as well.

Jan's stature and contacts around the world were invaluable to the work of the committee, which waged an intense international campaign, designed from the beginning at Dennis's insistence to use his case to publicise the links between the apartheid regime and the US government. In addition to tirelessly publicising Dennis's case, Jan also used his literary talents in the cause, as witness this poem he wrote for Dennis:

*For Dennis Brutus*

The sirens sing for me  
of your return to Zimbabwe,  
and on cool mornings  
you could perhaps trek south  
to a welcome in Goli  
or the Cape.  
No Saracens,  
blue antarctic eyes,  
and guns  
to greet you,  
but garlands,  
wild flowers  
for a troubadour.

(Dennis was born in Zimbabwe to South African parents.)

Finally, in September of 1983, a judge granted indefinite political asylum to Dennis after an electrifying public trial in Chicago that put apartheid and the US government's complicity with it on trial. The INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) immediately announced that it would appeal against the judge's ruling but, after a major outcry in newspapers around the country, quickly dropped the idea.

Once the work of the Defense Committee had been wound up, the core of the group immediately constituted itself as the Africa Network to continue and widen the work against apartheid. Jan and I were once again the co-conveners of the network and the Carews and I continued our close political association.

When the Chicago Committee to Defend the Bill of Rights chose Dennis as one of their two honorees in 1984, Jan was asked to write the programme notes for the annual banquet that was held for the honorees. Jan ended his presentation with a ringing tribute to his long time colleague with these words: 'And after the South African struggle has been won, as it surely will be, Dennis Brutus will continue to be an archetypal troubadour of the unfree, singing everlasting songs of struggle and hope, and of victory against tyranny.' Words which could equally apply to Jan himself.

*Guild Books*

My relationship with the Carews was further consolidated in the literary arena through the medium of Guild Books. Guild sponsored many readings and cultural and political events during this period. I had started working full time at Guild as assistant manager in 1985 after Vanguard Books collapsed. Jan supported the store in every way – he gave readings, he and Joy attended events, bought books,

and became an integral part of the Guild family. Through his efforts, his daughter, the writer Lisa St. Aubin de Teran, gave a reading from her new novel at Guild when she came to Chicago.

At that time, Michael Warr, a young African American poet and journalist who had returned to Chicago after a five-year stint in Ethiopia as a foreign correspondent, was in charge of programming events at Guild. He first got to know Jan through organising events for the Brutus campaign. Michael and I worked together on organising a number of political forums in those days, involving speakers like Jan, Dennis, Sterling Plump and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Jan quickly took Michael under his wing, and became very helpful as a mentor to him. In 1989, Michael went on to form the Guild Complex which, in the next ten years, he built into one of the premier cultural institutions in Chicago, which garnered national and international attention and acclaim. In 1991, Michael published his first book of poetry, *We Are All the Black Boy*, and received the Significant Illinois Poets Award from another of his mentors, the late, great, Gwendolyn Brooks.

#### *The Harold Washington campaign*

Politically, the 1980s in Chicago were dominated by the successful effort to build a city-wide coalition of political activists across racial lines to challenge the political power of the Daley machine, which had dominated politics in the city for many decades. It was a heady time – it involved electing not only the independent reform candidate Harold Washington as mayor, but progressive aldermen in as many wards as possible. The sweetness of victory in 1983 was tempered by the election of a small majority to the city council of old-time machine politicians. These hangovers from the Daley era spent the next several years trying to sabotage every single piece of progressive legislation put forward by Washington and his allies in what are still known as the ‘council wars’ in Chicago. Washington won a second term in 1987, but died only seven months later. After Washington’s untimely death, the coalition fell apart, and Daley’s son, another Richard Daley, regained power for a ‘face-lifted’ machine.

The Carews and I did not work directly together on the Washington campaign. I met Washington several times at Guild Books, of which he was a big fan, and which sponsored several events as part of his campaign. I was involved mainly in my north-side ward in the (successful) attempt to elect Luis Guttierrez alderman as part of the Washington coalition, while the Carews were busy on a city-wide basis using their wide range of contacts and organisations to successfully campaign for Washington. But through the Carews I was fortunate to meet other progressive activists, particularly Vernon Jarrett, a respected African American journalist first at the *Chicago Tribune*, later at the *Chicago Sun Times*. Jarrett had earlier helped get letters written by Joy and



myself published side by side in the *Tribune*, criticising an article on apartheid the paper had printed.

*Sixtieth birthday tribute to Jan*

In 1985, Joy and I organised a big tribute for Jan on his sixtieth birthday at the Midland Hotel with the help of many of Jan's friends and associates. Tributes poured in from around the world – from Cheddi Jagan of the People's Progressive Party in Guyana, Reverend Jesse Jackson, Richard Hatcher, Mayor of Gary, Indiana, and a large cross-section of politically progressive people and organisations from far and wide. Vernon Jarrett was the guest speaker. This time around, it was Dennis Brutus who gave the tribute to Jan Carew that was published in the programme book. It sums up the essence of Jan's life perfectly:

On the occasion of his sixtieth birthday, we are gathered together to pay tribute to Jan Carew – writer, artist, scholar, and statesman. Jan Carew represents for us a living symbol of the commitment to the liberation of all peoples from economic, political and racial oppression. Throughout his sixty years, Jan has never wavered in his commitment to the fight for freedom, despite the changing context in which the fight was waged. What is endearing about Jan Carew is his directness. He wears the great weight of his experiences and the breadth of his learning easily.

But of course his most outstanding characteristic and the one for which we are especially honoring him, is his resolute and unwavering dedication to the cause of Freedom. His passionate dedication to Human Dignity and his steadfast pursuit of the cause of human rights: this is what especially distinguishes him and this is where he has made his major contribution to society.

His dry wit delights his friends – the great Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o was reduced to speechless laughter by one of his anecdotes – characteristically one mocking the pretensions of academia. And always he aims his wit with deadly accuracy at injustice and its posturing perpetrators. We salute Jan Carew, Champion these many years of Justice and Freedom. It is an honor to be able to honor him.

*Nancy Singham is a political activist, living in Chicago, Illinois, and was a seminal member of the Dennis Brutus Defense Committee.*

# Accessing the light of prophecy

By *Ken Ramchand*

When I saw you in Bermuda, my mind went back thirty years to those magical and inspiring years of *The Black Jacobins* and *Beyond a Boundary*; Walcott's *In a Green Night* and Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*; Edna Manley's *Focus*; Seymour's *Kyk-over-All*; Collymore's *Bim* and Swanzy's 'Caribbean Voices'; Vic Reid's *New Day*; Roger Mais's *Brother Man*; Salkey's *Escape to an Autumn Pavement* and Hearne's *Voices Under the Window*; Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* and *A Brighter Sun*; Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* and *The Pleasures of Exile*; Martin Carter's *Poems of Resistance*; Mittelholzer's *The Children of Kaywana* and *A Morning at the Office*; and, of course, your vibrant *Black Midas* and *The Wild Coast* where you sent young Hector Bradshaw to absorb preserving influences and grow in mind and body.

These were the sensuous and passionate texts of an era, the dreams and the realities that could turn the federal idea into something more noble, generous and embracing than whatever it was those barren and self-seeking politicians might have been arranging among themselves. These were the texts that informed the intellectual and cultural self-confidence of a generation. Lamming soldiers on and Naipaul endures, but the rest of the early warriors are not here in body any more. These foundations were fortified, however, as I looked at you and listened to you, remembering the brilliant raconteur in Salkey's living room while joining young and old in awesome recognition of an elder and a presence.

Time could never do to you the frightening thing you dreamed in *The Wild Coast*: 'Age had heaped a mountain of bitterness on Aunt Hanna's spirit, turned her into a desiccated condor bird with feeble claws and loud croakings.' You spoke from your handsome tallness in a quiet and composed voice, subtle inflections telling, like delicate glances and late cuts. You spoke like a man who has lived life and loves it. You spoke like a man who had linked 'the world of swamps and forests and wide skies, and the world of the straight lines, the

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written word', the very thing that your invented teacher La Rose, like so many book-trained West Indians, was unable to do.

Everything was alive in you and to you, again unlike teacher La Rose, from whose confession and warning young Hector has to learn: 'Somewhere back in my small-boy days something got stamped to death inside me, and what it was I myself don't quite know – all I can tell you is that thing that's dead in me is alive in you, and you won't be a failure if you keep it alive.'

In those days of the search for national identity when selfhood was defined in political terms, you were writing about this kind of bad thing that could happen to human beings, to the individual. I guess you knew that this would be the source of many of our political and institutional failures. Why else would you allow Aron Smart in *Black Midas* to end his comparison of life in the forest with life in the cities thus:

In the village or the forest it had always been a straight fight for survival against a primeval Nature, while in the city a man was always coming up against institutions – laws which said one thing and meant another, a government which was like a body without a heart, for its heart had been cut out and buried under a mountain of paper.

The opposition is not really that simple or clear but it has something to do with the derivative dead-end our societies have arrived at today – the stalemate of our politics, the sell-out of the patrimony to investors at home and abroad, the subversion of human rights and democracy, the powerlessness of our people.

The stillborn Federation was quickly interred and then each of the separated islands rushed into an anticlimactic independence. There was no struggle to weld us into a nation, no poetry to inspire us to dreaming. Anticlimax turned to disillusion as the politicians in each small place raked in the spoils of being the government.

Today, we do not think of ourselves as a people any more, we talk of ourselves as relics – postcolonial, postmodern, post everything, as if our time has passed, homeless babas grieving that neither London, Paris, Brixton, Rome, Moscow nor any other place is our mecca, we who never seized the inspiration of the fifties to form a civilisation rooted in our place or to build upon the cross-cultural heritage we can glimpse as destiny in *Black Midas's* Georgetown streets:

They were like rivers jammed with logs, and we were pieces of driftwood. Crowds poured in and out of the large market-square, jostling, shouting, cursing, laughing, people of every race and colour on earth – Chinese, Negroes, East Indians, Europeans, Syrians, Amerindians and others, a mixture of so many races, you could not tell what they were. There were Negroes with Chinese



eyes, people with woolly hair and Hindu features, white men with faces which looked as if they had been rubbed in the dust of a burnt-earth road, swarthy men with grey-blue eyes and kinky hair, blonde Negroes and pale-faced Amerindians.

The New World possibilities of our region are there to see in the flux of your novels, and their anchoring point is the bond between person and place that allows the native to subsist a long way from home. In *The Wild Coast*, which is in many senses a fine coming-of-age novel, the old woman called Sister helps Hector to endure his tumult by assuring him of his security, no matter what:

This coast has already given you something that, wherever you go, you will have strong memory to hold on to – the smell of the earth, the feel of the hot sun, the knowledge that when you stand facing the sea there en't nothing behind you but swamp and forest and the blue horizon – you can never tear them things out of your system even if your restless spirit carry you to the ends of the earth.

It excited me to see that security in you, and confirmed me in my stubborn belief that we must travel universally in the global village but never forget our navel-strings in the particular Caribbean.

\* \* \*

The audience in Bermuda knew of your career as teacher and curriculum designer in the United States where, among other things, you were one of the founders of African American Studies at Princeton and Rutgers. They knew, too, of your wide range of friendly and working contacts in the Black world: W. E. B. DuBois, Arna Bontemps, Langston Hughes, Charles Johnson, Paul Robeson and Malcolm X. The audience in Bermuda probably knew of your connections with the West Indian writers based in London in the 1950s and 1960s. How much they knew of your long and intimate relations with Caribbean peoples and Caribbean artists and leaders, I do not know.

I think of you as a living archive of over fifty years of Caribbean and cross-cultural history. That is what I felt most strongly in Bermuda. You had lived it all. You are here to tell the tale. The late tyrant of Guyana, Forbes Burnham who, as a recently returned lawyer, needed to make back the money his father had spent on his education and therefore would not represent his colleague Cheddi Jagan when that young radical took strong action to help an evicted peasant; Edgar Mittelholzer who upset the calm of the town by his wish to be a writer and startled his wife by his proposal that she be part of a polygamous household; Roy Heath at Agricola; comrade Martin Carter singing vatic songs in the university of hunger; Sylvia Wynter whom you married and whose *The Hills of Hebron* you saw being formed;

and your brother-in-law, Wilson Harris, through whom you learnt the interior of Guyana and who worked with you to collect details of the life of the porknocker Herbert Scotland, the prototype of your fictional Black Midas.

The Ben O. Yisudas who changed your life in Berbice High School was the same ardent nasal voice who lent me books of criticism at Naparima College. Was the Rodway who taught you in unorthodox fashion the one who touched the life of Derek Walcott in St Lucia?

Your novels show that you recognised early the dangerous virtue of a sound colonial education. You remember Belle the prostitute, glorious Queen of Perenong, woman of the extravagant Ocean Shark, how she bathes in champagne on her birthday? She is one of the characters whom you license to voice a warning about turning the eyes away from what is all around: 'Is better to live than to read the white man book . . . All them book in Georgetown put together don't have half the story that people does live.' Incidentally, the wonderfully-named women of the Georgetown brothels who arrive in boatfuls to make the good times roll with the free-spending, fast-living porknockers in the interior put on an exciting show of recklessness and unthinking fun, but you honour them long before the fashionable ideologies and isms when you make them reflect in their quiet moments and let us in on their secret hopes and forgiving anger against the males who exploit them.

I had not seen you for a long time and I was so greedy to fill in the intervening years that I did not talk to you about *Midas* and *Coast*; books that tell of a landscape hosting so many scattered bones and buried voices; books that evoke the elemental force of cloud, river, sun and forest capable of dizzying the steadiest head and tying the swiftest foot, the immensity humbling man into a confession of frailty and of the need for community in the face of what is greater than man. Here is the learning Hector being humbled by the spirit of animated place:

He was conscious of the slightest sound or movement – his breath, his footsteps, the stirring of a branch, the distant cry of a bush rabbit, a leaf falling. While he walked under them, the trees breathed their stillness and their strength into him. Sunlight and wind had not reached down to the forest floor for a long time and the air was heavy with the smell of decay. Hector lost all sense of time, distance, direction. If Doorne and Tengar had abandoned him he would not have known where to turn.

As you unpacked your memories and experiences before the Bermuda audience, I thought about how much your now out-of-print books have to say to our young people about belonging, about being alive and about the social tensions in our place. I remember



the thoughts you put in the mind of the young man who mentors and befriends Hector, the son of his land-owning employer:

Tengar knew that some day his master's son would grow apart from him. Book learning and a consciousness of social difference would create a widening chasm between them. Sometimes the thought saddened him. Elsa was always harping on this theme, saying that them kind of folks does only wrap up with you when it suit them then they does cast you aside and turn up they nose when they meet you in the street.

Talking with you confirmed my thinking about the books. You understand poverty and the tensions arising from race and colour consciousness, and your pictures of those who scuffle and scheme and whore in Georgetown are vivid and telling still, but these are not your themes. Nor do we do these books justice if we take them only as raucous bawdy X-rated and amoral tall tales of life-charged denizens making the most of their fleeting time on this earth. 'Porknockers were a strange race of men. They took hardship and danger for granted, made and squandered fortunes, left the forest with thousands in their pockets swearing never to return, but they always came back, sometimes only with the shirts on their backs to call their own. They changed but the dream which hounded them never did.' At the heart of the books is a concern with the passing of time and a will, almost a moral drive, to make order and meaning without damping down the bewildering flux.

These are books about epic characters in a timeless landscape, living intensely and extravagantly, finding meaning in the indulgence of capacity and appetite for life, pulled this self-destructive way and that by the wild that is both inside them and outside them, living their contradictions fully yet perplexed by them. If we say that these books are profoundly political, we say so because they recognise that there is no meaningful politics in these islands, no commitment to radical change or social reconstruction, no use for culture save as a tourism product. What they do is to describe conditions that cry out for an imaginative politics and a creative understanding of history.

Such understandings informed your inspiring presentation. Elsa in *The Wild Coast* lashes out on behalf of the godless ones against the Christian religion that seems to draw Tengar and others in the village, but all she can pose against this is a kind of devotion to her own physical pleasures: 'She would have liked to tear apart and destroy the need in Tengar for hymn-singing, praying to a white man's God, making a fetish out of a book that white strangers had written to confuse Black people. Her religion was centred around her body and its appetites. She had no other.' Your work in academia has ever been devoted to promoting an understanding of the existence of other



cultures and other religions in our Caribbean as viable alternatives to be adopted or synthesised. *The Wild Coast* quite deliberately highlights the form and functions of African religions in the New World, setting up the figure of Caya as a Shango priest, possessed by the drum and speaking through the drum, and showing up the nonsense of Parson Grimes's derogatory remarks about false gods, animistic cults and pagan souls. The parson condemns the wind-dance that is still practised in Tarlogie as a retrograde measure, but it is not so for the Shango priest. Caya's drumming up the wind-dance enacts the middle passage and a history of proud survival and resistance:

Caya was beating out a fast one-three rhythm on his drum and its echoes drifted in to mock the parson. Caya found more solace in a drumbeat than he did in churchbells and the holy words that rolled off parson's tongue. The wind-dance was a link with Africa. His ancestors had been hauled out of this continent and scattered over a hemisphere. They had arrived naked and empty-handed, bringing nothing with them but their memories. But wherever a man wanders he will find the neighbour-wind, the companion-wind, the messenger-wind howling its welcome, fanning awake the still leaves, lying down and rolling on the grass and the reeds. Neighbour-wind can live next door to a man who is afraid of the strangeness of an alien land. Companion-wind can strum familiar tunes on the harp-strings of trees. Messenger-wind can carry a cry of anguish across continents and seas. The wind was a symbol of absolute freedom, it was invisible, amorphous, imbued with titanic energies, no stockades could contain it nor could whips and chains humble it.

All these thoughts about your early books tumbled across my mind as you spoke and I knew for sure that the values and the wisdom of the man speaking now had long been secreted in the fiction of yesteryear. Hector in *The Wild Coast* (who might well be trailing some autobiographical umbilical cords) is exposed to all the contradictions that we must live with, all the imposed dichotomies we must deconstruct if we are to come into our inheritance. Aron Smart/Black Midas/Ocean Shark is much more obviously a quest figure whose pursuit of gold/El Dorado/palace of the peacock refines itself finally into a vision of the nebulous.

All I need to say here is that, although we see his conscience and his consciousness developing from mistake to mistake, it takes a near fatal accident to strike him down and check his headlong pace. When at last appetite cannot outrun thought, he remembers a story told by Brother C – about the two men who had gone up the mountain, each of whom returned in proper order, with palpable treasures, and was made king in his time, and of the third whose clenched hand was empty and had no wondrous thing to show. The villagers eventually made him king, too.

According to Brother C, 'the light of prophecy shine in he eye' and the people understood that 'the best of God's gift had to be something no eye can see'.

The light of prophecy shone in your eye when I saw you again, Jan, after all the years in America-mountain. You brought back everything. But what you brought back is already part of our sensibility, what we are forever seeking and what we have always had (I have never been 'othered', have you?): above all our pride, our resistance to being made barefoot beggars or pale shadows in the global village.

When I take on my useless battles here, I do so with the knowledge and with the cultural confidence that all the ancestors are there if we choose to invoke them, and that if you got the chance you would be in the forefront, in body as well as in spirit, as your sojourn in Grenada demonstrated. To be ourselves and take part in the changing and growing world is something you have lived, as we must.

*Ken Ramchand is a Professor of English at Colgate University in the US and at the University of the West Indies, St Augustine, Trinidad and is the author, among other works, of the seminal The West Indian Novel and its background (London, Faber, 1970).*

# Third World literature as revelation – a letter to Carew

By *Richard Sobel*

*Dear Jan,*

In the mid-1980s, you asked me to write about my experiences in your 'Third World literature' seminar in my senior year at Princeton. Because that course had such a formative role in my intellectual and personal development, I welcomed that opportunity, as I welcome the invitation to extend those insights here. Two reasons, residing in what I learned from you and the seminar, motivate my writing this letter. First, during the readings and discussions in the course, I learned about experiences and realities that I'd never even previously imagined, let alone known existed. The readings and your penetrating analyses opened me to an understanding of other worlds and people that I'd only glimpsed previously through social sciences and social action.

Second, the paper I wrote for the seminar, about how the literature of the course<sup>1</sup> revealed and represented different levels of reality (even truth) from those I'd ever known was an important intellectual struggle for me. It constituted a mind journey to glimmering comprehension of previously unapprehended realities. For these insights, and your friendship since, I will always be grateful.

Even (perhaps especially) after a generation, I still cannot fully explain all the reasons your course was so important. But the impact certainly lay in learning about these different levels of experience and reality, ambivalences and paradoxes. In particular, the seminar showed me realities existing 'below the surface', beyond the realm of my normal experience. Partly this came from the phenomenon of a 'ground-upward' perspective, where, for the first time, I saw from the viewpoint of those in different parts of society and the wider world how they experienced life.

My notes from the course identify the eternal verities of the seminars and the readings – Third World literature seen from the bottom, including the dregs of society, like the situations of Carolina Maria de Jesus, the beggars in *El Señor Presidente*, Moses Boatwright – outside society and outside traditional boundaries. The approach is embodied in *The*

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*Ripening's* opening admonition to 'weigh every word, make acquaintance of every sorrow'. The dregs, including overwhelming debauchery, occur not just at the bottom but also at the top.<sup>2</sup> Reality versus what ought to be appears persistently, and it generates anger. Pride derives from recognition of what should be, as opposed to what is and will be.

Third World literature, as you presented it, is inherently political. *The Ripening* is itself the awakening to revolutionary consciousness. The political and economic forces are embodied in the experiences of colonialism and imperialism, British and French, as represented in this hemisphere by the United Fruit Company. Banana workers become new kinds of slaves. The treatment of the poor is abysmal.<sup>3</sup> Imperialism shatters cultures, colonialism people. Even the elemental forces of nature have political dimensions: the workers fight like a 'strong wind' to level the plantation. In the Third World, human institutions are more powerful than the political ones. The personal was political there, far sooner and more persuasively than in the American slogan and experience of the 1960s.

Third World literature revealed basic psychic and cultural processes and biases. Memory sprang from nowhere into the belly and experiences.<sup>4</sup> The collective memories of West Indians became a powerful motivating force, with village and farm life as constant referents; the experience of emigration from the Third World in the islands to the First World in Britain bound emigrants together.<sup>5</sup> Time and space became fused in a single entity. These two, you explained, are but one word in African languages. Time takes on and flows from the human rhythm of seasons and passages. Birth flows into death. Spatial journeys become temporal travel.

The base realities – powerfully contrasting with what was said or claimed – were reflected in surfaces.<sup>6</sup> The eloquence of the flowering prose of Third World speakers often obscured, but did not fundamentally alter, what existed in reality. Yet there was a two-way world of realities, a 'two way *weltanschauung*', evidenced in the English/Jamaican, black/white splits, and particularly embodied and yet bridged in black/white sex.<sup>7</sup> The black man suffered for the white man's crimes. The relationship was unbalanced, filled with ambivalences (in black/white guilt) and dislikes. These psychic processes became psychically distorted in 'mother', the mutilated beggar, and the relatives rejecting Eusebio Cannales when they felt pressed. Grief, sex and death are the great equalisers.<sup>8</sup>

Truth and justice barely seemed to exist in the literature of this Third World. Whether you were innocent or not was irrelevant; only whether you were in *el presidente's* favour mattered. You couldn't even oppose lies when you were out of power.<sup>9</sup> Truth was not what you said, only power determined truth. Third World Literature showed death as ever present, the only constant, unchanging.<sup>10</sup> Death, obsessively

Spanish, and life were closely entangled. People become oblivious to the ubiquity of death and dying.<sup>11</sup> The violence at the top contrasted with the splendour of society. The fascist was insidious yet absurd.<sup>12</sup> If the worst was possible, why not the best, too?<sup>13</sup> To analyse the world, including through art, is to keep it in range and, by means of resolving its contradictions, to change it. The unity of politics and art lay in art's collective use and uses. 'All great Third World art is committed', you would say, a means of transforming the world.

\* \* \*

Let me give examples from four of the books that impressed me greatly: *The Ripening*, *The Adventures of Catullus Kelly*, *The Meeting Point* and *Palace of the Peacock*. *The Ripening* introduced me to aspirations and experiences of development in the Caribbean – the search for personal and political identity – which I'd never recognised before. The source of the river Lezarde (the original French title), the source of life, lay in the beginning of human existence. In learning the meaning of 'macadam', glistening in the tropical glare, I came to understand that what we take for granted here has a very different meaning and power in the Third World when technological and political developments go slowly, then quickly, then merge together. The road that ties the past directly to the future knows freedom. The journey from the land travels into the twenty-first century.

*The Adventures of Catullus Kelly* introduced me to the aspirations and experiences of the expatriate: the Jamaican colonial who wants to go to the metropolis – London – but discovers that immigration is nasty. The cultural dislocation, the hatred of difference, the discrimination and the social and physical distances made for many unpleasant experiences. But there were still joys in the adventures, too. Old Catullus, true to his Latin namesake, enjoyed the risks and rewards of 'plinth' in Trafalgar Square. Catullus grew blacker in negritude. Base realities were reflected in surfaces.

And there was, too, the experience of immigration and arrival in Canada (from Barbados) of Bernice Leach and her sister Estelle Shepherd in *The Meeting Point*. In Estelle's magnetism, Clarke revealed how banal existence ramified into scandal in the Burmann home, how the employer's household and the employees became literally intertwined, bound intimately together. The Third World came to the First; the Third World became within the First. The long support networks, the favours back and forth among friends and countrymen, embodied links across space and time.

In *El Señor Presidente*, the banality of the corruption of the dictatorship was so completely portrayed that it revolted and enlightened simultaneously. Kindness was crushed, yet the beggar 'Mosquito' would not be forced to lie. One of your comments about *El Señor*



*Presidente* still sticks in my mind. You were talking about the personal insecurities and insecurities of power and venality that affected persons of lower middle-class origin, like the president. It was an insight into how class affects personal insensitivities, but not ambitions, and how success in political power does not change one's class background. I immediately thought of Richard Nixon, then current US president, crude, upwardly mobile and machiavellian. *El Señor Presidente* embodied the worst of society and societies. The president was lower middle class, moving up, fearing those below, despising those above, a classic, power-hungry authoritarian. He was a lawyer who didn't go to an upper-class school. *El presidente* presaged Nixon and shadowed Stalin. The destructiveness and pettiness of the dictatorship were overwhelming. *El presidente* and his group were as evil to each other as were the beggars. And yet, in suffering, the oppressors might atone, find redemption in the power of human institutions over political. In many ways, your course was like *The Prince* – at Princeton – elucidating a machiavellian political and social reality. But it was also different in that it dealt with how the human spirit could survive, even prevail, under adverse situations: human nature need not necessarily produce oppressive politics.

And there was *Palace of the Peacock*. I was fascinated with that book, its poetic prose, its fantastic, mythical, mystical, unconscious qualities; the river of life coursing through the rainforest; the unseeing eyes: fascinated but uncomprehending. I read and reread it – feeling its meaning was just eluding me – almost captured, ultimately escaping. I read a secondary source that I didn't quite understand either, which contained a selection by Anthony Burgess, then visiting at Princeton. Finally, in desperation, I called Burgess from a campus phone. By chance, I reached him and explained my need to understand the book. He recalled it and Wilson Harris's other work, and his comments revealed a keen interest in it. But he was busy then, leaving for Britain the next day and couldn't talk to me. I couldn't reveal my desperate straits because of my ignorance and dilatoriness in calling him so late on a late paper.

Similarly, I never came to talk to you about the book. The only out-of-class conversation I recall, in fact, was a brief phone call when I asked if you remembered me, and if, late as it was, I could still write the paper and get (audit) credit? I think I was hoping you'd say no. You said yes. About the other books I recall only fragmented points. *Child of the Dark* was not a pretty tale.<sup>14</sup> Yet it was close enough to stories of American poverty for me to relate to it sympathetically. It didn't substantially expand my perspective, but its very familiarity served as a bridge to new experiences. *The Man Who Cried I Am* expressed the anger of another invisible man, revealed by the author, who came to class but said little.<sup>15</sup> *The Strong Wind*, despite detailed



notes taken then, is but a weak memory.<sup>16</sup> *Of Holy China*, I recall the images of Topolski's drawings of a different world, the reshaping of man, the linking of politics with art.<sup>17</sup>

\* \* \*

The course came at the start of a troubling senior year at Princeton, during a highly alienating time in the midst of personal crises and the Vietnam War. During the spring of 1970, I, along with many others, had been politicised by Nixon's Cambodia invasion and the political events around it, the National Student Strike and the killings at Kent and Jackson state universities. And I remained so into my senior year when, despite predictions of ensuing change, all but a few enduring friends seemed to become depoliticised and a strange calm pervaded the campuses. Having great trouble doing academic work, I, like many of my peers, didn't want to be in school but couldn't drop out because of family conflicts and concerns about the draft.

I decided to write my paper during the inter-term in January 1971 as a 'road trip' to Smith College with a transfer student from there. I don't recall much about the trip except the struggle with the books and paper in the Smith College Library reference room (where I would occasionally return when I later taught there). I reread all the texts and (still extant) notes, looking for insights, exploring the different views of reality in the books. The revolutionary struggle and the development in *The Ripening*, the political corruption and oppression in *El Señor Presidente*, the mutual exploitation in *The Meeting Point*, the shocks and laughs of Catullus Kelly and the fantasies of the Peacock Palace. In ways I cannot fully recall, I put them all together in a new understanding, for me, of the truth. I can remember the mental struggle, to identify, understand and write about the books and disparate concepts: the sense of slow, grudging, painful progress towards understanding and enlightenment through a synthesis of ideas, images and emotions. It was almost a religious experience.

I recall now (though perhaps the years colour it) my sense that it was a good paper, fine but flawed. And yet I was embarrassed about its unsophisticated nature and its lateness. I remember dropping it off, anonymously, late, in a box outside your office at the Afro-American Studies Program at Washington Road. I was relieved to have it done. I didn't know if you would read it and accept it until I got my grades and saw the audit pass. I never picked up the corrected paper, much to my chagrin now. I couldn't face your comments. (My earlier writings weren't too good and your comments I experienced as quite critical.) It was that paper, if I recall correctly, that brought me back in touch with you at Northwestern. I wanted to ask if you recalled it – even had it. (Important as it was to me, it probably wasn't to you.)

I am aware in writing these words that I have so far left you largely out of the course and this letter. To some extent, it is a credit to your teaching that the material was so forceful without your interventions. But I recall some things about the seminar quite well. Most importantly, I recall it as my introduction to the oral tradition. I recall your enthusiasm, appreciation and total comprehension of the material. You had a love of the literature, a familiarity, a stance almost as advocate for it that made me feel I was being guided by the author into each book. Your tall, stately, almost regal, dignity and lyrical, almost poetic, prose embodied and suffused the course.

I recall particularly your presentation of the images in *Holy China*. While I didn't understand why the country (revolutionary China was then closed to Americans) was so important, I knew that the large book and its drawings revealed truths about life on the other side of the world that were forbidden to my countrymen's and my experiences. I recall the beauty and the orality of the classes, the lucidity and poetry of your explanations. The importance of 'the word', spoken, written, the flowing sounds of Glissant, *señor*, Guyana, Paramaribo. I came to understand that the word, the self-spoken word, was essential, and while literacy and writing might be paths into that experience, the very acts of speaking or hearing were more closely tied to the experience itself than its more literary representation.

The class was small, less than ten and mostly black students, including John F., now a swami, with perhaps one other white, Scott E., a basketball star. I felt outside of the class as a white, only an auditor, with no previous experience in Third World literature (I'd only travelled in Puerto Rico).

My relationship to the seminar actually began with its prehistory. In spring of sophomore year, I was one of two student members, co-opted as educational reformers on to the Princeton Course of Study Committee when the course was discussed. I had no idea what the Third World was then – and for years after, perhaps. I remember one conservative faculty member on the committee, a historian, saying that there was no Third World and that the title of the course should be changed. He was unpersuasive and we approved the course, title unmodified. Perhaps that experience piqued my curiosity, though I don't recall it as a motivation. I think I came to the course independently, from growing interest in things political and social. Freire, Fanon, Marx, Marcuse, Schumpeter, Schattschneider, martyrs and mentors, some now lost, others changed, introduced me to object and subject, power in non/American society, the political, man's ontological vocation to be fully human.

\* \* \*



I recall an invitation to visit Joy and you at the house at Northwestern near Chicago. I was flattered that a great man like you would invite me, but wasn't sure you remembered me. It was a house full of art and culture, and the visit started an important friendship. Through you, of course, I've met some of the authors of the books: Austin Clarke in Toronto, Felix Topolski in London, Andrew Salkey at Hampshire College. Through reading yours and your daughter Lisa St. Aubin de Teran's books, I've kept my eye and mind on Third World literature. Names and ideas from that course – da Silva, Lucero – have since re-emerged as cohorts and colleagues; ideas – race, gender, class – as opportunities and instigations. And I had the good fortune of bringing you, Joy and Lisa St. Aubin to speak about art and politics (before Salkey and Roxie) at Smith when I taught there in the middle 1980s. I have met friends and admirers of yours from all over the world. Sharing news of Jan Carew – for instance, arguing with Skip Gates over who knew you first (he did, at Yale the year before our course), phoning our common wolf ethnologist and writer friend, C. J. Rogers – continues to be a source of excitement for deliverer and receiver. Especially your children's books – *The Third Gift* and *Children of the Sun*<sup>18</sup> – have been much-appreciated gifts for colleagues and growing families over the years. It was a great pleasure to contribute, even virtually, to Philadelphia's Carew eightieth birthday celebrations – although most of us think of you as timeless and ageless, even at four-score.

In looking back again, what I retain the most from your course and that paper is the insight that life and literature are more complex, rich, variegated and compelling (ugly yet promising) than I could have imagined before. 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio . . . ' I see reality and experience differently. I recognise that the personal and psychic course of human development accompany and often precede political change and development. I see how, through the literature, one can understand politics so much more clearly than through direct political analysis; how life and memories can come together again in past, present and future.

*Con muchas y amantas gracias,*  
Rick

*Richard Sobel is a political scientist and an Associate of the Afro-American Studies Department at Harvard University. His latest publication is The Impact of Public Opinion on US Foreign Policy Since Vietnam: constraining the colossus (New York, Oxford University Press, 2001).*



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I would like to thank Scott Early, Melissa Gallagher, C. J. Rogers and Brooke Rudolf for comments and help on this article.

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- 4 See, e.g., *Palace of the Peacock*, op. cit.
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# Jan Carew – comrade in struggle

*By Dennis Brutus*

Jan Carew – academic, activist, scholar, humanist – is probably best known for his books, such as *Black Midas*, *Moscow is Not My Mecca* and *Ghosts in Our Blood*. His historical essays, such as *Fulcrums of Change* and other historical works, like *Rape of Paradise* – both of which I commend for scholarly study – continue to inform younger generations with their valuable insights, not provided elsewhere.

For many of the older generation, however, Jan's work in Pan-Africanism, both in South America (Guyana) and Africa, is what is most important of the man's many contributions. His work with Kwame Nkrumah, giant in the history of Pan-Africanism, was especially important.

We did not, I must add in honesty, begin on a good note. We both joined the Faculty of Northwestern University at about the same time. An ugly conflict had developed in the Department of African American Studies at that time, while I was in the English Department. I was drawn into the debate and we were on opposite sides. But, as I learned more about Jan, I grew to respect the man, and we became close allies – particularly as we merged efforts on the anti-apartheid campaign.

This brings me to two areas of Jan Carew's work that are of special importance to me, and I would like to dwell on them briefly. The anti-apartheid movement in the United States in the years 1960 to 1980 was an important part of the worldwide movement that brought down the apartheid government after the passage of the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Sanctions Act of 1986 (vetoed by former US President Ronald Reagan, but overridden by both Houses of the US Congress). In that movement, the divestment campaign, with one of its main centres in the US Midwest, played a pivotal role and Jan Carew, working with me at Northwestern, played a significant part in this. South Africans owe him a debt of gratitude.

But I have an even more significant, personal, debt to Jan. When I was served with a deportation order by the US government – actually, I was served three, seeking my deportation in turn to South Africa,

Zimbabwe and Great Britain – Jan Carew rallied to my defence and served as chair of my defence committee. Joy Carew, Susan Szech, and Y. B. Holly (the latter, sadly, now departed) were also key members of this team. They carried the defence to so successful a conclusion that Judge Schwartz of the Immigration and Naturalization Service ordered that I be granted political asylum. For this, I shall always owe gratitude to Jan, and to those who helped us with this victory.

With eighty years of achievement and accomplishment behind him, Dr Jan Carew would be entitled to relax in the glow of his many useful and successful endeavours, but he continues to be active; still frankly critical when this is called for, still warmly supportive of all that serves the cause of social justice – a cause for which he continues to strive with fierce energy – he is a tireless ally in any fight for justice.

Many more years of activism, Jan!

*Zocalo: March 11, 2001*

It stretches for great distances  
 that enormous expanse  
 a harsh surface underfoot  
 immense, a great square  
 confronting a vast edifice:  
 (nearby, steps, a huge cathedral –  
 Maria Imperatrix, possibly,  
 mothers, babies at their breasts  
 sucking, with begging cups):  
 this ground is sacred  
 soaked with heroic blood  
 of those who died for freedom  
 sacred too, with footprints –  
 Pancho Villa, Zapata trod this square  
 now Zapatistas arrive  
 fanfare of triumphant trumpet notes  
 flourish of banners, bandannas, masks  
 with streamers that declare:  
 ‘We are all Indians’  
 for all the world, they declare.

*Dennis Brutus is a South African poet, political activist and Emeritus Professor of Africana at Pittsburgh University. Active in the multi-dimensional anti-apartheid campaigns, he is now involved in the international anti-corporate globalisation campaign.*



# Tributes

## *From Joe Rosenblatt*

I would like to extend a happy birthday to my friend, Jan Carew, on his eightieth. From the mid-sixties, when he first introduced me to jogging in Toronto, got me to give up tobacco, and once even demanded that I throw away a starchy bun, wherein a succulent fillet of veal rested, Jan has been, to my knowledge, a social activist and an advocate for the earth's oppressed. His good humour and infectious optimism is a rarity today, where cynicism has become, too often, a basic staple for survival among writers. Jan loves poetry. I recall an incident when he visited me in Qualicum Beach on Vancouver Island a few years ago. I voiced some misgivings then about writing poetry because, for me, it was slated forever to be at the bottom of the cultural heap. I also expressed a little envy at vigorous prose writers beaver away at fat novels, as opposed to an obscure poet producing a slim volume that no publisher wanted. Jan turned to me and, with a gentile ire, declared, 'Joe, damn it, you're a poet!' He wasn't going to tolerate self-loathing for one microsecond. Works of the imagination have always been Jan's goal from the outset of his writing career. Added exponentially to the process of creative writing has been Jan's fierce, uncompromising intellect, ever honed whether it is focused on an essay on racism for a scholarly journal, or on completing a novel, or, yes, even a poem. I would like to express my gratitude to Jan for tolerating my unsunny cynicism but, more than that, for the encouragement he conveyed to me as a younger poet, to get on with pursuing my poetry. Don't let his sunny smile disarm you.

*Joe Rosenblatt is a Canadian artist living in Qualicum Beach, Vancouver and author, among other works, of Escape from the Glue Factory (Exile Editions, 1986).*

## From Sterling Plumpp

For Jan

On the way from graves of relatives  
 if it has rained I listen for bubbling  
 conversations of wet earth, and think  
 of you, Carib. I know the soil of this  
 strangeness cannot mute their dialogues  
 with history. This you teach in amaranth  
 laughter miles below the bass cereal quaking  
 in a voice carrying Ghanaian and Guyanese  
 legends. In Calypso-wet anthems of truth  
 I hear brown rivers fussing in your eyes.  
 They could plant cotton or cassava or melon  
 in acres of your skin because your body  
 is a delta; spirits of your ancestors  
 spew you from their journeys down to bays  
 of Niger landscapes. Sediment of your bones  
 competes with the Mississippi Delta for blues  
 singers and wealth.

When I think of death I hear your palms reaching  
 from silences pulling epics of Paul Bogle or Robeson  
 or Dedan Kimathi or Ho Chi Minh or Fidel,  
 Nat Turner. I think of worlds made of little folks'  
 tears and bloodstained memories you carry inside  
 your speech.

*Sterling Plumpp is an African American poet who lives in Chicago; one of his more recent works is Hornman (Third World Press, 1995).*

## From Maurice Bazin

Jan, on and onwards.

We met almost half your lifetime ago, either in Government House in Georgetown, or the next day at the Berbice train station. Cedric Belfrage had come from Cuba where he lived as editor in exile of the *National Guardian*. He introduced me and Nancy to Cheddi, Janet and – you. You made electoral speeches to the peasants; I took notes and then pointed out to you how to improve your address. I was so sure of myself, then – with my fresh PhD in nuclear particle physics! Your tolerance allowed the building of our friendship. But you, too, told me what to do, and that turned out to determine my point of

view on science and scientists: you sent me to read J. D. Bernal, and I never stopped putting 'science *in history*' ever after.

You got me to meet the most exciting and inspiring people from that multi-everything Caribbean crucible. Somehow, you all form a sort of dispersed university in exile. I wish you were all together somewhere – it would make it easier to visit you all in one place and refresh oneself in contact with all the sparks from your brains and the sparkle from your sea. And now, sip every minute of this time you are spending together. I wish I were with you.

*Maurice Bazin is a French scientist, living in Brazil, and one of the founders of Science for the People in the US and A Space for Living Science in Rio de Janeiro.*

### *From Peter Plenge*

Last time I visited Jan, Joy and Shantoba was in Amherst, in 1989, in mid-August. There was a smell of apples and wet grass in the air. Jan took me on a walk in the nearby forest. We followed a deer trail and talked about the Indian Wars.

I know of no better guide than Jan. He is able to penetrate the surface of the surroundings and show you things hidden in the shadows behind the immediate impressions and explanations. When I visited for the first time, Jan took me on long walks in the neighbourhood where you lived in Chicago, and opened the windows to a world that I had never seen and hardly heard of before. It was a world where moral tools such as solidarity, tolerance and respect for other people were indispensable if you were to stand a chance of surviving the abuse, discrimination and racism that were the order of the day. For many years, I had a small bag of amaranth seeds that Jan gave me, lying in a cupboard drawer to remind me of Jan's ability to combine human vision with social action. His footprints are in Guyana, Ghana, Grenada and around the world.

*Peter Plenge is Director of the University of Aalborg, Denmark.*

### *From Maureen and Rupert Lewis*

It is an honour to pay tribute to you, Jan, on your eightieth birthday. We first read your novel *Black Midas* in the 1960s when we were students at the University of the West Indies in Kingston, Jamaica. You belonged to the famous group of West Indian writers who went to England and made careers and we were reading as much as we



could of the feast of novels and poetry that you produced. The energy of the nationalist movement of the time found artistic expression in your work and that was how we got to know you, at a distance through your work.

We met you in Prague in 1984 in the wake of the assassination of Maurice Bishop and the American military intervention against Grenada. This was a very low moment. I, Maureen, was then working on the editorial council of the *World Marxist Review* and you were in Prague as a guest of the International Organization of Journalists working on the book *Grenada: the hour will strike again*. Your book gave hope for a long rebuilding of the progressive movement in the Caribbean.

Thanks for writing that wonderful memoir *Ghosts in Our Blood: with Malcolm X in Africa, England, and the Caribbean*. Thanks for your inspiration and example.

*Maureen Lewis is in the Department of English at the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, and Rupert Lewis is in the Department of Government, also at Mona. Among their recent publications is Garvey: Africa, Europe, the Americas (Africa World Press, 1994).*

### *From Anne Hickling-Hudson*

Jan is a very special person, a significant Caribbean thinker, artist and activist. A Jamaican educator myself, I first met him in Jamaica in the mid-1970s when I was teaching at an inner-city high school in an area of Kingston racked with social and economic disadvantage. Jan went with me to visit the school, and I will never forget how he immediately and decisively aligned himself with the needs of the students. Liaising with me, he found out from the teachers what was most needed, and organised a campaign in the US to raise money to help buy spectacles, school uniforms and schoolbooks for the students, and to contribute to the school meals programme. As a guest invited to the school, he gave several talks on Caribbean history and literature to my students, raising their consciousness about the richness and beauty of the literary tradition of the Caribbean and opening their minds to think about his homeland, Guyana, which was unknown to them. Of course, I encouraged my classes to read *Black Midas* and *The Wild Coast*. My two little boys were under ten at the time. He so fascinated them with legends and stories of adventure in the forests of Guyana that they remember them to this day, now that they are in their thirties and living in Australia.

Jan was a committed supporter of the Grenada Revolution of 1979 to 1983. He visited Grenada for extended periods and contributed to

the change process in many ways, including helping young farmers in the local community experiment with better methods of growing nutritious crops. After the revolution collapsed, Jan wrote a history of Grenada, ending with the story of the 1979 revolution: *Grenada: the hour will strike again*. It's a measure of the effectiveness of the book that subsequent conservative governments in Grenada banned it: to this day, the book is not easily accessible in Grenada.

Happy birthday, Jan, and may there be many, many more.

*Anne Hickling-Hudson is in the Faculty of Education at the University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia.*

### *From Keith Ellis*

Upon saluting Jan Carew on his eightieth birthday and wishing him many more years of good health and fruitful and inspiring work, we think of his diverse achievements and how they have enriched our lives. We think of how, in his pleasant, smiling way, he has been telling truths that need to be told, especially to those who would deny justice to people whose image has been tarnished for centuries, so as to perpetuate the denial of their human rights. He has felt the responsibility for his research to span the centuries. And his tendency to root his work in the pre-colonial period in the Caribbean and in Africa, combined with his unfailing humanist wisdom, has yielded powerful insights into the historical processes of the peoples of the Americas and Africa. He has uncovered Columbus's barbarism and has illuminated the various achievements of the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean and continental America. For many years, he has been studying how Europe set back Africa's development and has focused, too, on pre-slavery contacts between Africa and the Americas.

All this rigorous historical work has afforded Jan a reliable platform for understanding our contemporary world. Hence his extraordinary powers of discernment with regard to world affairs. I remember the scepticism with which I read, many years ago, an article of his in which he wrote of the fragility of the Soviet Union and the greater astuteness that would sustain the People's Republic of China. He was, of course, correct. And we recall his just, anti-imperialist indignation when the British invaded his native Guyana in 1953 and when the US invaded his admired Grenada thirty years later.

Jan's example of intellectual and moral courage has inspired many. The elegant and lucid prose in which his uplifting novels, short stories and essays are rendered has won the admiration of readers in several languages; only recently, Abel Prieto, the Cuban Minister of Culture spoke to me of '*Black Midas* . . . a tremendous novel'.

Jan deserves our profound thanks for his enormous contribution to the culture of our times.

*Keith Ellis is a Jamaican-born educator who lives in Toronto, whose latest publication is Torrente Prodigioso: a Cuban poet at Niagara Falls (Toronto, Lugos Libros Latin America and Havana, Editorial José Martí).*

### *From Ursula Hanes (Tibi)*

Meeting Jan over thirty years ago was a turning point in my life. I think he would agree that both he and I catalysed important changes in each other's lives. Certainly his influence changed my way of choosing priorities thereafter.

Jan opened my eyes to so much and gave me the insight to understand and appreciate, more deeply, different cultures and peoples all over the planet. He whetted my appetite to begin to know West Africa. I say 'begin to know' because to know it completely would take more than just one lifetime. However, I did have the opportunity to live and work in Mali for several years where I grew to love the people and the generosity of spirit which overflowed into their lifestyle. This experience totally changed my 'white' values and has stayed with me all of my life.

He once said to me that he thought I was the beginning of his becoming a 'feminist'. We spoke often on this subject; the relationship of man/woman, the masculine/feminine in each human being, etc., and I know that Joy has carried this on.

It is, after all, a vital part of an essential change of consciousness, necessary if we are to see the survival of our planet and all its living things. Can we actually learn to accept difference in all the familiar forms such as race and religion? Not only white arrogance versus the ways of others, but can we, as homo sapiens, stop considering ourselves superior to all other life forms? We need to consider and respect each and every living thing and the part they play in the miraculous tapestry of interaction which we call ecology, so that the Earth can breath again and permit the balance to be re-established.

Perhaps this is idealistic, but this conviction was strongly enhanced through knowing Jan and I'm sure he carries it in his heart today, just as I do. I am equally confident that he will carry on his work for many years because in his spirit he is young and open and full of passion for what he believes and what he does. All of us who have crossed his path know that he not only works with that passion, but has also the ability to share and transmit it to all those with whom he comes in contact.



Many moons after our first meeting, I arrived at Jan and Joy's home in Chicago with my special friend, Donni Buffalo Dog. It was a reunion of clans and races and a great celebration. Now, nearly twenty years later, very dear Jan, both Donni and I wish you the happiest of birthdays.

*Ursula Hanes (Tibi) and Donni Buffalo Dog are artists from Canada and the US respectively, now living in France.*

## *From Claire Carew*

### *Ode to Jan Carew*

Dear Jan,

With luminous eyes piercing the facade of reality:

Bringing forth so eloquently the thought patterns and symbols of our ancestral lineage:

My elder, born on the rich soil of Guyana:

an aura of brilliant light surrounds and protects your energy field and tall regal frame.

The spirit made visible through our beloved one named Jan Carew.

And as my own spirit soars I smile as your presence envelops and elevates the intellectual discourse of the day.

I am humbled by the question 'Are you related to Jan Carew?'

Yours a voice of integrity:

revitalising broken souls.

Picking up shattered pieces and fragments of time of scattered memories, profound losses and buried dreams tossed to the wind.

Ravaged by slavery the African Holocaust and genocide of the Aboriginal peoples of the Americas.

Your hand and gentle voice guides, moulds and shape-shifts our truths and aspirations;

through your books, essays, poems and observations.

And as your tenderness and compassionate spirit continues to attune to the cosmos of all that is seen and unseen;

I pay homage, and bow in reverence to you

Dr Jan Carew.

*Claire Carew is an artist and poet living in Toronto.*

# Jan Carew: a biographical odyssey

- 24 September 1920 Born, Agricola Rome, a village on the Guyana (British Guyana) coast
- 1924–26 Family moved to the United States for two years
- 1926 Returned to Guyana with elder sister when younger sister was kidnapped in New York (child was found in 1927 and sent back to her family in Guyana)
- 1926–38 Attended Agricola Wesleyan School, then attended Catholic elementary school and Berbice High School (a Canadian Scottish Presbyterian school) in New Amsterdam
- 1938 Passed Senior Cambridge Exam
- 1939 Worked as part-time teacher at Berbice High School for Girls
- 1939 Called up to serve in the British Army
- 1939–43 Served in Coast Artillery Regiment
- 1943–4 Worked as a customs officer in Georgetown, British Guyana  
Published first written work in the *Christmas Annual*  
Did much drawing and painting
- 1944–5 Worked at Price Controls Office, in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad
- 1945–6 Studied at Howard University, Washington, DC, US
- 1946–8 Studied at Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio
- 1948 Exhibited paintings at the Cleveland Public Library
- 1949 Returned to Guyana for six months  
Wrote for the *Political Action Bulletin*  
Published first collection of poetry, *Streets of Eternity*

- Received scholarship to study at Charles University in Prague, Czechoslovakia
- 1949 Left for Prague, stopping in Paris, France, for a while
- Met Brazilian painter Tiberio, Pablo Picasso, André Gide, Richard Wright, Olie Harrington
- 1949–50 Studied at Charles University
- Met Brazilian author, Jorge Amado, and spent time with Picasso again
- 1950 Returned to Paris
- Wrote first novel, *Rivers of His Night* (unpublished), first chapter of which was published in *Kyk-over-al*
- 1951 Lived in Amsterdam, Netherlands
- Was Guest Editor on *de Kim*, a multilingual literary journal
- Sent regular pieces to be broadcast on the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC's) *Caribbean Voices* and other programmes
- 1952 Returned to England
- 1953 Served as a columnist on the *Kensington Post*
- 1953–5 Joined the Lawrence Olivier company, appearing in plays in London, Liverpool and New York
- 1953–9 Did regular broadcasts for the BBC on art, literature, current affairs
- Lectured in race relations at London University, Extra-Mural Department
- 1958 Published the novels *Black Midas* (US edition, *A Touch of Midas*) and *The Wild Coast*
- 1960 Published the novel *The Last Barbarian*
- 1962 Returned to Guyana to take up post as Director of Culture in the Jagan government
- Served as the Latin American correspondent for the *London Observer*
- Reported from Cuba during the Cuban missile crisis
- 1963–4 Returned to England
- Was Art Critic for the *Art News and Review*, and wrote book reviews for *John O'London's Weekly*
- Did regular broadcasts on the BBC's *Caribbean Voices*, *Home Service* and *Third Programme*, including plays, poetry, short stories and features
- Travelled to USSR for first time as guest of the Writers' Union



- 1964 Published *Moscow is Not My Mecca* (US edition, *Green Winter*, 1965)
- 1965 Met Malcolm X in London and had lengthy discussions with him.  
Edited *Magnet*, a black fortnightly newspaper there
- 1965–6 Lived in Ghana, served as advisor to the Publicity Secretariat in the Nkrumah government and editor of the *African Review*
- 1966 Moved to Toronto, Ontario, Canada
- 1966–8 Did work for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), including poetry, stories, interviews and features  
Wrote and produced a number of television plays  
Travelled to West Germany as guest of the West German government
- 1969 Moved to the United States
- 1969–2000 Taught at various US universities: Rutgers and Princeton (1969–72); Northwestern University (1973–87), now Emeritus Professor; George Mason University (1989–91); Illinois Wesleyan University (1992–3); Lincoln University (1993–96); and the University of Louisville (autumn 2000)
- 1971–4 Wrote reviews for the *New York Times Sunday Book Review* and features for the *New York Times Travel Section*
- 1975 Published children's book, *The Third Gift*
- 1980 Published children's book, *Children of the Sun*
- 1982 Lived in Grenada
- 1984–5 Wrote first articles for *Race & Class*
- 1985 Spent three months in Prague, Czechoslovakia as guest of the International Organization of Journalists
- 1985 Published *Grenada: the hour will strike again*
- 1987 to date Active member of *Race & Class* editorial working committee
- 1987–9 Lived in the town of Tlaquepaque, outside of Guadalajara, Mexico
- 1990 Met and talked with Wilfred Little, Malcolm X's brother
- 1994 Unauthorised edition of *Rape of Paradise* is published

- 1994 Published *Ghosts in Our Blood: with Malcolm X in England, Africa and the Caribbean*
- 2000 Moved to Louisville, Kentucky
- 2001 Currently married to Joy Gleason Carew. Has three children – Lisa St. Aubin de Teran, David Christopher Carew, Shantoba Eliza Kathleen Carew; and three grandchildren – Iseult Teran, Alexander MacBeth, and Florence Duff-Scott.

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*Rape of Paradise*, New York, A&B Books, 1994  
*Fulcrums of Change: the origins of racism in the Americas and other essays*, Trenton, Africa World Press, 1988  
*Grenada: the hour will strike again*, Prague, International Organization of Journalists Press, 1985

## Novels, novellas and children's stories

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*Black Midas*, novel, London, Longman, Horizons Edition, 1980, 1981; Schools Edition, 1970  
*Children of the Sun*, children's book, Boston, Little, Brown and Co, 1980  
*The Third Gift*, children's book, Boston, Little, Brown and Co, 1975  
*The Wild Coast*, novel, Nendeln, Kraus-Thompson, 1971  
*Black Midas*, novel, Nendeln, Kraus-Thompson, 1971  
*Green Winter*, novel, New York, Stein and Day, 1965 (US edition of *Moscow Is Not My Mecca*)  
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- O Midas Negro* (*Black Midas*), Lisboa, Editora Ulisseia, 1961 (Portuguese edition)
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**Stories**

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- 'The winged bean, a high protein legume', *Bulletin of the Fifth Commission*, National Council of Churches, New York, 1976
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- 'Vse Vozvrashchatsya K Rodnim Holman', *Inostranaya Literatura* Moscow (Vol. 2, February 1980)
- 'The conversion of Tiho', German translation, *England Erzählt*, München, De Mendelessohn, 1959

#### **Poetry**

- Assorted poems, in *The Caribbean Book of Verse*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1998
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- Six poems, in *Black American Literature Forum*, 1983
- 'Obote must return', Third World Center, Oberlin College, 1983
- 'The history maker', *Pacific Quarterly*, 1982
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- 'Requiem for my sister', *Nimrod*, Tulsa (Vol. 21, no. 2 and vol. 22, no. 1, 1977)
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- 'Africa – Guyana', *Journal of Black Poetry* (1973); also in *Like it is*, New York Penguin Books, 1973
- 'Ten years', in A.J. Seymour, ed., *New Writing in the Caribbean*, Georgetown, 1972; also in Andrew Salkey, ed., *Breaklight*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1972
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'The dyke' and 'The cities', in *Bite In: an anthology*, London, Thomas Nelson, 1971

'Lovers', *New World*, Kingston (Vol. III, no. 4, 1967)  
*Street of Eternity: book of poetry*, Georgetown, 1950

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'De Kliffenbij Mazanilla', poetry, in Kathinka van Dorp, ed., *De Zee de Zee: gedichten uit he hele wereld*, Amsterdam, Van Gennep-Noviv-Nicos, 1998

Eleven poems, in Vladimir Klima, ed., *Karibsky Majak*, Prague, 1987

'Cedars of Lebanon', translated into Spanish by Elisio Diego, Havana, 1983

'Nicaragua – Grenada: de une crisalida de arcoiris', *La Revista*, Havana, Casa de las Americas (No. 117, 1979)

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'Carta a Agostinho Neto', *La Revista*, Havana, Casa de las Americas (No. 99, 1976)

'Requiem for my sister', translated into Estonian, in *Antillian Lunen*, Estonian Writers' Union anthology of West Indian Poetry, 1965

'Ata', 'Black laughter', translated into German, in Jan Heinz Jahn, ed., *Schwarzer Orpheus*, München, 1959

'Manerabisi', translated into German, in Jan Heinz Jahn, ed., *Schwarzer Orpheus*, München, 1950–1960, several editions

## **Plays**

### *Stage*

*Black Horse, Pale Rider*, in *Roots and Blossoms: African plays for today*, Troy, Michigan, Bedford Publishers, 1991

*Gentlemen Be Seated*, sent on tour to the Venice Festival and to Yugoslavia by the Canada Arts Council, 1967; performed by the Toronto Workshop Productions, 1967

*University of Hunger*, performed by the Georgetown Theatre Guild to mark the occasion of Guyana's independence, Georgetown, 1966; option bought by Royal Court Theatre, London, 1960

### *Radio*

(These plays were all written for BBC radio between 1960 and 1969)

*Song of the Riverman*

*The Riverman*

*University of Hunger*

*The Legend of Nameless Mountain*

*Ata*

*Anancy and Tiger*

(These plays plus lyrics based upon traditional Guyana folk melodies.)

*Television*

(The following were written under contract to Associated Television, London, between 1963 and 1964)

*The Big Pride*

*The Day of the Fox*

*Exile from the Sun*

*The Baron of South Boulevard*

*No Gown for Peter*

*The Raiders*

*The Smugglers*

*A Roof of Stars*

*The Conversion of Tiho*

*A Touch of Midas*, the screenplay of the novel, was included in the 1985 Screenplay Analysis Workshop, drawn from submissions from across the nation.

**Reviews**

*Proud Empires* by Austin Clarke, *Toronto Star* (April, 1988)

*A Kind of Living* by Angus Richmond, *Caribbean Contact*, 1979

*Black Presence in Multiethnic Canada* by Vincent D'Oyley, *Canadian Journal of Education*, 1978

*A Double Exile* by Gareth Griffiths, *Journal of Caribbean Studies*, 1978

*New York Times Sunday Book Reviews* included the following:

*Anthology of Asian-American Writing*, 1974

*Long George Alley* by Richard Hall, 1973

*Natives of my Person* by George Lamming, 1973

*The Water-Method Man* by John Irving, 1972

*Die the Long Day* by Orlando Patterson, 1972

*No Resting Place* by Eugene Mirabelli, 1972

*The Polygamist* by Ndabaningi Sithole, 1972

*Panthermania* by Gail Sheehy, 1971

*Look for Me in the Whirlwind* by the New York 21, 1971

*A Special Rage* by Gilbert Moore, 1971

*The Emergence of African Fiction* by Charles Larson, 1971

*Raise Race Rays Raze* by Imamu Amiri Baraka, 1971

*S.R.O.* by Robert Deane Pharr, 1971



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*Edited by Joy Gleason Carew and Hazel Waters*

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